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OR,

The Rocky Mountain Masks.

A Companion Story to "Old Forked-Lightning."

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "REVOLVER ROB,"
"PISTOL JOHNNY," "FRANK LIGHT-
FOOT," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SPECULATING MESSENGER.

"FREE drinks in decent moderation" is what he said, gents. "On with the dance, an' turn joy loose without bail"—or words to that effect! He comes to me an' says, says Chispa Charley: "Gabe, you bald-headed heart-smasher, lis'en to your uncle while he speaks his little piece. To-morrow Chispa goes up the flume, an' comes down plain Charles Hampton, with a little wife in his button-hole 'stead of a gun, painted paste-board or whisky-holder. No more late hours an' lively rackets for yours-to-command! Chispa

SLOWLY BUT SURELY THE BODY OF THE GOLD NUGGET SPORT DREW NEARER THE
ROCK IN THE CENTER OF THE RIVER.

has tackled his last tiger, buried his red paint-brush, trod his final war-path—turned his back forever—and—amen onto the wild-and-woolly freaks an' frolics that leads to spitting cotton an' the use of a sledge-hammer afore you can drive your hat on! Home instead of The Grave! A wife instead of the Sexton! An' in the place o' the flutter o' cards, the rattle o' chips, the clink o' glasses an' the—instead o' them—"

It was too much for the spirit-softened heart of honest Gabriel Sexton, and though he buried his rosy countenance in the depths of a flaming silk handkerchief, blowing a mighty blast and wringing his poor little pug nose until it seemed as though it must come off in his agitated grasp, he could not even disguise his lugubrious emotion.

And there were those among his present audience who were almost as seriously affected, each worthy showing it after his own peculiar fashion. There were gloomy glances, solemn wagging of shaggy heads, deep sighs and doleful groans. There were men who almost choked as the red liquor ran down their fire-proof throats. Men who forgot to smack their lips. And one who slowly, firmly turned his glass bottom-up on the bar!

Could poignant grief show itself more clearly?

It was a memorable night in the lively mining-camp of Canaan, in more senses than one. The whole town was alive with excitement, and a goodly portion of the population was gathered inside the saloon and gambling-room kept by Gabriel Sexton and widely known as "The Grave."

In the days of old, before he drifted West, Gabriel Sexton had been an undertaker. He failed in business, solely because he was so fat, so jolly-looking, so exactly the opposite of what he should be in personal appearance to properly fill that solemn and decorous position, as he himself declared in his confidential moments. But the jolly smile, the oily laugh, the good-natured fun that seemed to ooze out at every pore of his roly-poly body, served him well in his present occupation.

If an utter failure as an undertaker, Gabriel Sexton was a complete success as a club-house keeper, and his very peculiarities served to render him all the more popular with the rough-and-ready miners and sports of the silver-land.

There was a grim humor in the name of the place, in the lurid sign which shone brightly above the door, in the funereal pictures and ornaments which were displayed so lavishly on the whitewashed walls and on the shelves behind the bar, that pleased those wild, reckless fellows.

"All roads lead to the grave!" said Gabriel Sexton, as he hung his illuminated sign in place, eying it approvingly with his head cocked on one side.

The sign was a glass-fronted coffin. In the center was painted Death and the Devil, playing cards over a dead man. Above this cheering scene, was painted in gaudy letters, "The Grave!" Below appeared the name of Gabriel Sexton.

On the wall of the saloon proper, were pictures of cemeteries, of funerals, tombs and similar scenes. On the shelves were various emblems, more realistic than appropriate; but all this served to attract rather than drive away custom.

As for Gabriel Sexton, he was a picture in himself! Had any other man in Canaan dared to wear his dress, of spotless white duck, of snowy linen and rich velvet, of silken hose and patent-leather pumps, that man would have "heard something drop" before the first night was over! But Honest Gabriel was a highly privileged character, quite as much from his innocent doll-baby-like face, rosy and free from wrinkles, though his pate was bald and his fringe of curling, silken hair white as snow, as through his inexhaustible good humor and profuse generosity. To strike him would be like assaulting a girl in boys' clothes, or a little lad strutting around in all the glory of his first knickerbockers.

Never until this never-to-be-forgotten night had any one in Canaan known Gabriel to be under the influence of liquor. Not that he ever refused an invitation to imbibe; that might be dangerous, and certainly was unbusiness-like; but on all such occasions Sexton drank out of his own private bottle, and there were those who more than hinted that his drink consisted of cold tea! But there surely must have been something far more potent in the bottle than cold tea on this occasion.

If not drunk, Gabriel was fast tending that way. His prime white choker was twisted under his ear. His baby-face was red, his blue eyes glassy, his nimble tongue rapidly growing thicker. The dainty wild flowers in his button-hole were drooping and hanging their heads. His carefully laundered garments were losing their stiffness and taking on a reckless, dissipated air, as though to mock the labored assumption of dignity with which Gabriel strove to hide his growing unsteadiness of tongue and footing.

"Thus it was, gents, that Chispa Charley spoke—Chispa, the noblest Roman of the whole deck! 'Tell the boys good-by for Chispa, cousin-of-my-heart!' he said. 'Tell them to bury me

deep, and wash my grave down with the best poison you've got in the shop. Free drinks to all, in decent moderation. Fill 'em up spigot an' bung-hole, but don't let 'em make hogs of themselves—don't let 'em drink more than they can hold!'"

Blowing another sonorous blast, Gabriel turned toward the bar where his first assistant was quietly awaiting orders, and at a gesture of his trembling hand, a magnificent chain, composed of polished links and virgin nuggets of native gold, was held up to view.

"It was the chain that helped to give him his name, he said, gents, when he took it from around his neck and dropped it on the bar. When Chispa sunk out of sight, it was right that his chain should go, too. But let it aid to make his friends happy once more. Let each yellow link, each *chispa*, melt into good liquor and search out the brave and gallant hearts of those who—who—"

The little fat man's voice was choked with a gush of maddening tears, and leaning back against the bar, he blubbered like some overgrown school-boy fresh from the disciplining rod.

For a wonder, there were none present who cared to laugh or scoff. More or less acutely they were agitated by the same emotions which had overcome Gabriel Sexton. Though liquor was running free, it was no occasion for rejoicing. Instead, they felt more as though burying a dearly beloved comrade.

"What's our loss, is his gain," interposed Donald McLean, a stalwart young miner, refilling his glass. "We lose a boon companion, but he gains an angel for life. Fill up and drink hearty, mates! Drink to the bride-elect! To Miss Dinorah Metcalf, the purest and loveliest lady in all the mines!"

In silence and with uncovered heads, the toast was honored. Then, sobbing, his watery eyes blinking in the bright light, Gabriel Sexton added:

"Once more, for Chispa Charley; the best and truest—the whitest and grittiest—the most blessed and happy man in all the mines!"

"Amen to the fu'st, but I'm puttin' up two to one that he ain't the last—not by two or three long shots!" broke in a harsh, peculiar voice as the toast was duly honored.

Every eye was turned toward the speaker: a tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered man who had just entered the saloon.

His garments were ragged and dusty, his face and hands soiled, like one who has recently made a long and tiresome journey through the dry gulches. His face was lined and hungry-looking. There was a half-wild light in his black eyes that spoke of recent fears or a partially-unsettled brain.

"Hoot!" grunted Donald McLean, his clinched fist relaxing as he beheld the intruder. "I thought it was an owl, but it's only Windy Johnson. Never pay heed to the croaker—he's only talking for the sake of hearing his own sweet voice!"

A general laugh followed this half-contemptuous speech, for this late comer seemed to be pretty well known by all; but Gabriel Sexton, filled to overflowing with liquor and love for the gallant Chispa Charley, seemed to scent an insult in that croaking voice, and fiercely bristled up, like some fat bantam challenging a tall shanghai.

"We were drinking to the long life and eternal happiness of Chispa Charley, sir. And no man can refuse to honor that toast and yet walk out of this establishment on his own legs, sir! Waiter, a glass, full to running over. And you, sir—take your choice: whisky or *be-lud*! Drink or perish!"

With a half-sheepish grin, the tall fellow slipped past the stumpy arm with its clinched fist, and grasping the glass, speedily swallowed its contents.

"Noble fellow! put it thar!" murmured Gabriel, lurching forward and grasping the dingy hand between his plump palms. "You're white, if you do look like grim death at a wedding-feast! And you shall be one of the guests, or—"

"I've got the rocks that says they won't be no weddin'," positively interposed the stranger, slapping one hand on his pocket, nodding so vigorously that his battered felt hat slid down over his haggard eyes. "No weddin', no guests, no nothin' but weepin' an' wailin' an' gnashin' o' teeth an' misery without end! Money talks, gents! Put up or shet up! Two to one that Chispa Charley ain't the happiest man on airth this very minnit! Ten to one they ain't no weddin' to-morrow with the couple you've bin toastin'. Any odds ye like that the next sun won't see the Miss a Mrs., nur yit Chispa a doubled-up man in matrimony with that same leddy! Come, now!"

The men stared aghast for a brief space. They were pretty well aware of the peculiar failing of this fellow whose recklessly wagging tongue had gathered for him the significant name of Windy Johnson. They knew that he would bet—or offer to bet—on anything under the sun, so long as he could get a single person to listen to him; but now there was something

more assured than ordinary in his voice, his manner, his looks—something that filled them with a vague uneasiness.

Windy Johnson pushed the battered hat further back on his head, gazing nervously around on the bronzed faces before him, moistening his cracked and parched lips with his tongue, then glancing toward the clock that stood behind the bar, the hands of which now pointed to twelve, midnight.

Donald McLean was the first to recover from that uncertain shock, and with a laugh that contained far more contempt and impatience than of anger, he produced a buckskin purse and thumped it on the counter, crying:

"Put up it is, then, Windy! Name your own bet, and I'll fall in with the terms. But no excuses, my fine fellow! Come to Limerick, or else cut your lucky and keep your nose out of pie that belongs to your betters!"

There was a covetous light in the haggard eyes as Windy Johnson started forward, half-drawing his hand from the pocket into which it had slipped. But he paused, with a short, uneasy laugh as those faces turned dark and threatening about him.

"A man kin win ef he bets on a sure thing?"

"Unless he lies for the sake of getting such a bet, of course," promptly replied Donald. "Come to Limerick, old man! Don't weaken at the send-off!"

"It wouldn't be right—I'd win your money, without givin' you the ghost of a chance to save it!" muttered the old man, slowly shaking his head, unheeding if he heard the mocking laugh which ran through the assembly.

"Wind—and none too sweet wind at that!" sniffed the young miner, taking up his purse.

"Two fools have met—and I'm one of them for listening to the idle vaporings of the other!"

The gaunt man flung back his head with a gesture that was almost proud and haughty. His wild eyes gleamed and glittered with a light that seemed little short of insanity. His harsh voice sounded bolder and more manly as he spoke:

"If wind, it is a cyclone that bears misery and ruin on its wings! If wind, it is a storm that will bring destruction to the happy air-castles that Chispa Charley has been building! Will bring, say I? Has brought, I should have said!"

He impulsively strode forward and grasped one of the many bottles which stood on the bar. He poured out a glass full of whisky, then gulped it down, his bony hand trembling like a leaf as he did so; trembling still more as he fumbled in his rags and produced a silver coin, which he dropped on the bar, only to have it pushed back to him by the keeper.

"Keep your money, Windy; drinks are free at The Grave for this night," he said, not unkindly.

The giant figure was drawn rigidly erect, and the harsh voice was almost haughty, as he retorted:

"I'm no beggar. I can pay for my own drinks!"

"Not to-night in this place you can't, Windy. Not a red cent crosses this bar to-night. It's Chispa Charley's treat, as a good-by to his bachelorhood. He's to be married in the morning, you know?"

"Was to have been, but will not be. Money talks—and mine says they won't be no weddin' to-morrow! Two to one, or longer odds fer them as lacks the sand to take the fu'st. Ten to one Chispa don't marry to-morrow!"

"The old fool is drunk already," muttered Donald McLean, caring little whether his words were overheard by the wild-looking fellow or not.

"Drunk or crazy, let him go," added another of the party.

"You hain't got any money that says so!" muttered Windy Johnson, stealing another cautious glance at the clock.

No one paid any further attention to him just then, but all resumed their drinking and talking. There was but one subject deemed worthy of conversation that night. They dwelt on the manliness of Chispa Charley. They praised the beauty of Miss Dinorah Metcalf, swearing that she was the loveliest, the most perfect of women, while they regretted her having ever struck the camp. For, but for that coming, Chispa Charley would not have surrendered his bachelorhood; they would not be taking their last farewell of the gallant Gold Nugget Sport, without even the consolation of his presence.

"But it's all for his good, mates," added Donald McLean. "He's too white a man to be the last of his race. It's right that he should marry and raise up children to fill his shoes when he is called higher."

"It wouldn't seem so rough if the old fellow was only here to take a last drink with his old mates," muttered Dick Whiffler, the velvet-fingered faro-dealer.

"He's in better company," was the half-regretful reply. "He's with the lady, over at the Dam, and—"

"I'm bettin' he ain't with no leddy!" impulsively cried Windy Johnson. "Money makes the mare trot, an' my money says that Chispa's

in a mighty wuss sight place than buzzin' a pritty gal at this writin'—"

Almost fiercely Donald wheeled upon him, his honest blue eyes flashing fire, his voice hard and menacing:

"Will you drop that infernal croaking? If you weren't such a crack-brained loon, I'd almost swear you'd been playing some dirty trick on Chispa! As it is, bridle your tongue, or outside you go in a heap, if your heels break your neck!"

"Two to one, you don't dast do it!" whined the fellow, shrinking away and trembling violently as the stalwart young miner started toward him with clinched hands.

Donald stopped short, laughing despite himself, his cheek flushing with honest shame at having threatened to use violence toward one whom he more than half-believed was crazy.

"Come, Windy," he said, with a sudden change of humor. "If you *must* bet, let's get it over with. Out with your money."

"You won't kick? You won't say I was ropin' you in when you know all I know? You won't blame the old man when you see he was bettin' on a sure thing?" dubiously whined the man, his eyes glowing covetously as he watched the little shower of gold and silver as Donald poured it from one hand into the other.

"Not a kick and never a squeal, though you skin me from A to Izzard!" laughed Donald, his blue eyes glowing with something more than amusement, as he keenly eyed the other.

He began to believe that there was something serious hidden beneath all this talk. Though Windy Johnson was always ready with his offers to bet, he never before was known to be so nearly ready to back his words with cash as now. Surely the crack-brained loon had gained some knowledge of misfortune having befallen Chispa Charley? Or if not already fallen, of impending peril.

"It's a fair warnin' to all," nervously muttered Windy Johnson, with another glance at the slowly moving hands of the clock. "You're bound to lose. It's like robbin' of ye. You hain't got the ghost of a show to win if ye bet. Sense I tell you that, you cain't blame me?"

"Not a blame," promptly replied Donald, still striving to read the secret which he felt those haggard eyes contained. "Make hay while the sun shines, is a mighty good motto."

"An' they ain't much time, nuther!" with another glance at the clock. "At one o'clock I've got to show my han' to the board, an' they won't be no bettin' then—sure!"

"Nearly an hour—time enough to win and lose a dozen fortunes, where men of sand are bucking against each other! Come to Limerick, Windy! Name your stakes—in four figures, if you like," with a half-wink at the amused crowd.

"A man cain't bet more'n he's got," muttered Johnson, as he produced a limp-looking purse of buckskin from amidst his rags. "What I've got I'm ready to put up. Fu'st—ten dollars that Chispa Charley ain't the happiest coon in this deestrick; that he's more mis'able than I be—an' that's needless!"

A murmur of wonder ran through the crowd as Windy Johnson actually planked down the money to back his words.

With a very grave face Donald McLean covered the sum, his burning gaze riveted upon the eager face of his adversary, still striving to solve the puzzling enigma.

"Ten dollars that they ain't no weddin' tomorrow between Chispa an' the ledly you was talkin' 'bout! Five dollars that Chispa don't git to the place they was to be hitched at on time! Five dollars that ef he does he don't find the gal thar on time an' waitin' fer him!"

Still in silence Donald covered each bet as soon as offered, his face growing graver and harder as his fears grew stronger.

With a nervous sigh Windy Johnson shook his purse and turned it wrong side out. With a low, dubious laugh he turned his glittering eyes around the line of faces, whining:

"They ain't any gent as would like to j'ine in with me on this little speckilation, is they? I furnish the bets an' the gent furnish the ducats, share an' share alike in the winnin's? It's a dead open-an'-shet. You cain't lose!"

There was no answer. If any one present had felt inclined to accept the offer, one glance into the hard-set countenance and burning eyes of the stalwart young miner would have warned them off. He was in a dangerous mood just then.

"Down to bed-rock, Windy?" he slowly asked.

"My last red!" was the doleful response.

"The bank is closed, then. Collar the *oro*, barkeeper, and hand it to the winner when the bets are settled. And now, Windy Johnson, we'll talk business."

One hand fell heavily on the fellow's shoulder, and those burning eyes held him fixed in his tracks.

"What does all this mean? Where's Chispa Charley? What has happened to him? What hand have you had in the pie? Out with it, man! Talk straight as a string or it'll go hard—"

A heavy form lurched against the speaker,

tearing his grasp loose, and Gabriel Sexton thrust a revolver into the face of Windy Johnson, spluttering thickly, but in dead earnest:

"Sing loud, or I'll fit you for a coolin'-board! Where's Chispa Charley? What've you done with him? *Sing or croak!*"

CHAPTER II.

AN ANONYMOUS WARNING.

TWENTY long and terribly rough miles to the southeast from Canaan, stood Tinker's Dam; so called from the name of the man who gave the "city" its first vigorous start in the race for wealth, together with the effective if rude and ugly monument of his genius.

Valuable quartz lay plentiful on every hand awaiting only the proper treatment to richly repay the labors of man; but of wood there was little, of coal none; there were no roads over which the fuel could be transported or the ore carried to a market. It would cost a fortune to make such a road, and just then none of the little band of miners had a fortune lying around loose to spare for that purpose.

Some desperately advocated the building of primitive Mexican *arrastras*, or mills, consisting of two huge rock wheels attached to the ends of a vertical beam, and dragged around in a circular trough, carried by the waters of the little river, a portion of which might be diverted from its course by means of troughs or flumes. And in that suggestion, Jason Tinker saw his golden opportunity; from that forlorn hope was born "Tinker's Dam."

Near the spot where the little river debouched from the wild and rugged hills in which it found birth, under Jason Tinker's supervision, a huge dam was built, of brush, of log cribbing filled in with rocks, of stones and mighty bowlders. It leaked plentifully, even when in its prime, but that was to be expected, when not a trowel full of mortar was expended upon the dam. It was rude, uncouth, ugly, an eyesore on the face of nature; but what of that? It held an ample sufficiency of water for running two large crushers, and almost from the first revolution of the rude wheels, the daring venture began to make the fortunes of those most interested in it.

That was in the days of—comparatively speaking—long ago. The dam still stood, still served to run the original crushers, but the mining-camp was now a city, and far beyond the stage of dependence on the rude brush dam for its life and prosperity.

Capital and fresh blood had come to the rescue. The necessary work was done, the money paid out, free as water, until Tinker's Dam could boast of its good roads, its mighty mills, its developed mines, its substantial business houses and its really comfortable dwellings—usually the last item that troubles the average miner.

There was one building, standing near the broken ground which formed the base of the mountains, some little distance from Tinker's Dam, which was really a curiosity in such a wild and remote situation. It was a large, two story structure, with a square roof, the center of which was adorned by a neat cupola, inclosed with glass. The building was of wood, weather-boarded, painted, and furnished with blinds.

Most of the material had been manufactured on the spot, from logs hauled to the river and then rafted down to the little saw-mill; but enough had come over the rough trails hundreds of miles, to cost a neat little fortune for freight bills, as any old residenter could tell you.

But the kunnel didn't keer fer the spence, he didn't! A freer man with his *oro* never trod the footstool, in them days of old. Pity he went to the bad—a pizen pity!"

That was Colonel Darius Teemer, once the reigning power at Tinker's Dam. "When he took snuff, all the rest sneezed!" His word was law. Whatever he said was done, if man could accomplish it. The man who dared to cross the will of the mining magnate, the millionaire of Tinker's Dam, was generally regarded as a fit candidate for a lunatic asylum—or grave.

Besides being sole owner of the richest and best paying mine in that vicinity, the "Better Yet," as it was called, Colonel Teemer owned a score of other and lesser lights on the road to fortune. He was one of those genial, free-and-easy men who wholly captivate those who rank lower in the social scale than himself. He could drink and carouse with the wildest one night, then lead a prayer meeting the next. One day he was as near being a king as any man can ever become in this land; the next he was worse than nothing, dead, degraded, dishonored.

It was an old story in Canaan and Tinker's Dam, though hardly two months had rolled by since the tragedy, and one asking any question concerning it, would be greeted with a pitying stare of surprise by an inhabitant of either camp. Yet that old story must be resurrected for a few moments, for the better comprehension of what is yet to be recorded.

Twenty years before the date of this story, which is located in the Year of Grace, A. D. 1880, a man named Tucker Metcalf left his wife and son in their Eastern home, and started for Pike's Peak, hoping there to win a fortune to re-

place the one unlucky speculations had robbed him of.

From time to time he sent letters home, now hopeful, now desponding, as fickle fortune smiled or frowned on his efforts. And thus four years passed by. The child which he had never seen, born to him some months after he had faced the setting sun, was old enough to talk of her papa, to look and long for his homecoming, when a white-winged missive flew into the poverty-stricken home and set all hearts there to dancing with joy beyond the power of words to express.

At last the fickle tide had turned in his favor, and Tucker Metcalf was coming home, with gold sufficient to keep them in comfort if not in affluence for the rest of their days. He would not be long after his letter. They might look for him any day.

And look they did, day after day, week after week, month after month—until a year had dragged its slow length along without bringing the expected footstep. Even then hope still lingered, but it was fated to never be fulfilled. Tucker Metcalf never returned home. No word or message came from him after that one joyous letter. All but the devoted wife and mother believed he had faded from the face of the earth.

She hoped on until the last. The death of a distant relative gave her a small fortune, the larger part of which she expended in trying to ascertain the fate which had kept her beloved husband from her side. She never knew. She could gain no positive clew. All she discovered was that a man known by that name had, years before, mined in the vicinity of Denver. Where he now was, what had become of him, no man seemed able to tell her.

And then, worn out in body and spirit, she died, leaving her boy and girl to the guardianship of an old and faithful friend. But not even death could wholly conquer her faith that her husband still lived. Dying, her last words were of him, bidding her son devote his entire life, if need be, to solving the mystery which enshrouded the fate of his father.

It was a sacred charge, and sacredly kept. Fremont Metcalf kept advertisements running in the newspapers, preferring those which were published in mining regions, or those which had the widest circulation in those regions.

Their old guardian died, and left them a few thousand dollars with which to carry on their almost hopeless quest. And then, when Fremont was just past his majority, when Dinorah, his sister, was nineteen years of age, an answer came to one of their advertisements, offering news of Tucker Metcalf, for a consideration—Five Thousand Dollars.

It was an extortionate demand, and when paid would leave the brother and sister almost penniless, but without hesitation, Fremont Metcalf answered the letter, accepting the terms.

There were peculiar conditions attached to the offer. Those who advertised must journey to the Far West, to a mining-camp known as Canaan. Fremont Metcalf was to seek out a saloon and gambling house known as "The Grave," kept by one Gabriel Sexton. He was to enter the saloon, and wait for recognition. When a man should pointedly call his attention to a particular playing-card—the five spot of clubs—he was to return to the place at which he was stopping, and there await the appearance of his correspondent. The slightest departure from these conditions would result in the utter destruction of his dearest hopes.

Fremont Metcalf carried out these strange conditions to the very letter. With the large amount demanded, he and his sister journeyed to Canaan. He visited the saloon, and there became involved in an unfortunate quarrel with a reckless character called Romeo Bugg—a whimsical desperado such as can be found only on the verge of civilization.

Apparently thinking he "had a soft thing" in dealing with this white-handed, effeminate-looking "tenderfoot," Romeo Bugg tried to impose upon him, not only trying to force him to drink, but dropping one of the ugly spiders with which the rim of his hat was adorned, into the glass of liquor, and demanding that he should swallow the disgusting dose, on penalty of annihilation.

On his refusal, a quarrel followed, in which the big bully was roughly handled, despite the evil gang at his back, thanks to the opportune appearance of an odd genius known to the inhabitants of Canaan as Old Forked-Lightning.

Fremont Metcalf soon after was startled by the appearance of a rough-clad fellow, who flung the five-spot of clubs across the counter, then left the saloon. Metcalf returned to his room at the hotel, where he was telling all to his sister, when a man thrust his head over the low partition which divided the chamber from the others on the upper floor.

This was his anonymous correspondent, who gave his name as Jay Flicker. He declared that he could tell all about the missing man, but after cunningly extracting the information that the lost man was the father of the young couple, he impudently doubled his price, flatly refusing to sell his secret for less.

A quarrel followed, for Fremont was unable

to pay the amount demanded. The room was lighted by a single tallow candle, placed on a bracket against one of the thin partitions. As he grappled with Jay Flicker, trying to frighten his secret from him, the light went out, and in the darkness a shot was fired that killed Jay Flicker.

In the office below stairs was a man known as Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport, from a curious chain, or *chispa*, which he wore around his neck, and the fact that his buttons were all formed of virgin bits of gold. He was known as a gambler, and by his skill, his courage, his address, he had won the position of "chief" among the sporting class of Canaan and Tinker's Dam.

In company with the landlord, John Forbes, Chispa Charley rushed up-stairs, bursting open the locked door, finding Jay Flicker dead, Fremont Metcalf staggering to his feet with a revolver in his hand, from which weapon one shot had been recently fired. Dinorah Metcalf lay on the bed, fainting. No other person was in the room.

The alarm spread like magic, and in the confusion that followed, Colonel Darius Teemer charged Fremont Metcalf with having murdered Jay Flicker. Chispa Charley stood his friend, and refused to permit his arrest until it could be done according to law. Colonel Teemer sent for the coroner, who was deeply in his debt, and who was doubly anxious to favor the mining.

At the examination which followed, conducted by the coroner, desperate efforts were made to fix the murder on Fremont Metcalf. Dinorah declared, on oath, that by the flash of the revolver, she recognized the face of Colonel Teemer as he held the fatal weapon, but that gentleman, who was acting as foreman of the jury, brought witnesses to testify that at the moment when the fatal shot was fired, he was standing in the street, some little distance from the hotel. One of those witnesses was named Walter Kever, who had, before she came to Canaan, vainly sought to win Dinorah for a wife. Once deeply insulting her, he was punished severely by Fremont.

During the examination, the accused was gallantly supported by Old Forked-Lightning. When the testimony was all in, he took brother and sister back to the parlor, leaving them as he said, to send Chispa Charley to their aid.

The coroner's jury brought in a verdict declaring that Jay Flicker came to his death by the hand of Fremont Metcalf. The Marshal of Canaan, Dave Long, arrested the accused, and took him to the rude calaboose, placing the building under strong guard, for he believed an effort would be made to lynch his charge. Such an attempt did seem imminent, but it was only a cover to a more cunning and less perilous scheme on the part of those whose interest demanded the sacrifice of Fremont Metcalf.

Chispa Charley, whose real name was Charles Hampton, was a detective in the employ of a well-known express company, whose strong boxes had suffered frequent robbery in that district. As the dashing sport, and in another disguise as Old Forked-Lightning, Chispa Charley did good work in hunting down the robbers, though keeping his agency well hidden from the public. He had great influence over the gamblers of Canaan, as a leading member of their fraternity, and hastening to his rooms to remove his disguise as Old Forked-Lightning, he rallied the sporting fraternity and led them to the defense of the jail.

Unfortunately he was seen to shift his disguise by a gambler, Tom Degnan by name, who was a secret ally of Colonel Teemer, and who at once made known his discovery to that worthy.

By direction of Teemer, Degnan stole the disguise and assumed the role of Old Forked-Lightning, the better to carry out the plot against Fremont Metcalf. Having thus far acted as a trusty friend, it was almost certain that the prisoner would fully trust the one whom he could not suspect as an enemy.

Degnan, with trusted men, managed to surprise the men who were guarding the rear of the calaboose inclosure, and then succeeded in making an entrance to the jail. He said he was acting under orders of Chispa Charley, and as the only method of avoiding a desperate struggle, in which many lives must certainly be lost, he persuaded Fremont to flee with him.

When once safe among the mountains, he threw off the mask in seeming, declaring that he was really an enemy, who had vowed to bring him, Fremont, to the gallows. He would wait for a few days, until the worst passions of the citizens of Canaan could be aroused against him, then bind and gag Metcalf, taking him back to town as having just been captured. His mates in the conspiracy would at once raise the cry for blood, and before any explanation of the truth could possibly be made, the victim would be dead.

In desperation, Fremont managed to slip his bonds, and sought safety in flight. He was discovered at almost the first step, and fired upon. In dodging through some bushes and rocks, he tripped and fell into a deserted shaft, the shock rendering him insensible.

Just as he made his desperate leap for liberty,

Chispa Charley, who had set out in quest of Fremont as soon as his escape was discovered, came upon the party under the false Old Forked-Lightning, his first shot bringing the treacherous gambler to the ground. His fellows quickly disposed of the other party, and then Chispa took up the trail of the fugitive, soon discovering the accident which had befallen him.

Lowered into the old shaft by his men, Chispa found that, though senseless, Fremont was not seriously injured by the fall, and while his men were drawing the youth up to daylight, his eye was caught by a strange flashing, flickering light. On examination, he discovered the fleshless skeleton of a man, on one bony finger of which was a curious ring. Taking this, with a moldering pocketbook, he was drawn up from the shaft.

When he told of his discovery, Fremont recognized the ring as one which his mother had often described, as having been worn by his father, and a sort of heirloom. Then the note-book was examined. In it was found the title deeds to the valuable mine known as the "Better Yet," together with a receipt, signed by Colonel Darius Teemer, acknowledging payment in full from Tucker Metcalf for the said mine.

While these events were transpiring, Colonel Teemer was trying to perfect another branch of his intricate plot against the Metcalfs.

During the examination before the coroner, the painted likeness of Tucker Metcalf was passed from hand to hand, it being one of the articles picked up in the chamber where Jay Flicker came by his death. Colonel Teemer, after examining the likeness, declared that the original was still living. His declaration was indorsed by Donald McLean, a young miner on the jury, who had shown that his sympathies were with the man whom the rest believed a murderer. He said the original of the portrait was now known as Dick Morley.

With this Dick Morley, Colonel Teemer and Walter Kever, who was in reality the son of the colonel, visited Dinorah Metcalf at the hotel. Morley told his story, which corresponded perfectly with what little the daughter had learned of her father's life in the mines; but she distrusted them all, and refused to accept him as a parent just then.

The next evening, while plotting together, Colonel Teemer and his hopeful son received a note from Dinorah, requesting their immediate presence at the hotel. Believing their triumph at hand, they hastened to comply, but one went to his death, both to disgrace and discovery. They were arrested by Dave Long, and confronted by Tom Degnan, the false Old Forked-Lightning, who made full confession. Seeing that all was lost, Colonel Teemer leaped through the window, seeking to escape. His toe caught on the sill, and he was found dead, having broken his neck.

Walter Kever, or Walter Teemer, as he was rightly called, was given into the hands of the excited citizens, who soundly flogged him, then ordered him to flee the country, under penalty of death if caught around Canaan after a short grace.

It appeared that Colonel Teemer held the mine "Better Yet" through a fraud, if not by murder. He noticed the many advertisements, and to make all things sure, sent his son to investigate. When it was found that one of the rightful heirs was a maiden of marriageable age, young Teemer tried to secure her for a wife. He was still trying this, when one of the league, Jay Flicker, resolved to betray his comrades and sell the truth for a small fortune. Young Teemer followed the brother and sister, telegraphing his suspicions to his father, who prepared to meet this fresh peril. Romeo Bugg was acting under his first orders, in trying to draw Fremont Metcalf into a row, by means of which he could be slain without any disagreeable consequences. But Colonel Teemer soon discovered that the peril was even greater than he had at first feared, and set a trap to discover and dispose of the traitor. This he was enabled to do quite handily, thanks to the peculiar construction of the upper story of the hotel, the chambers of which were simply divided from each other by thin partitions which did not reach to the ceiling. He put out the light, as Fremont grappled with Jay Flicker, leaped in the room, wrested away the revolver, shot Flicker, then felled Metcalf with a blow on the head, escaping from the hotel by the rear, during the confusion.

The manner in which Tucker Metcalf, if indeed that skeleton belonged to him, came by his death, was still a mystery; but with the title deeds to the mine, Chispa Charley took possession of the property in the name of his young friends.

To Dinorah alone had he confessed the whole truth; that he was the original Old Forked-Lightning. The citizens were permitted to rest in the belief that Tom Degnan, who died of his wounds, was the strange being who had so thoroughly befooled them.

Romeo Bugg and his gang of toughs fled from Canaan, in fear of lynching when their connection with the diabolical plot was revealed, nor had they again made their appearance at the date of this supplemental story.

The Metcalfs took possession of the "Better

Yet," and Chispa Charley, as he was still know, temporarily assumed the position of business manager. But as the days rolled on, he became a candidate for a still more important situation—that of husband to the fair Dinorah—and gained the promise of it, too!

The Metcalfs took possession of the Teemer mansion with the other property, since the money taken from the mine by the usurper, and which was rightfully theirs, would far more than pay for it all. And there the brother and sister resided at the time when this story opens.

Dinorah Metcalf sat at a window which looked toward the not very distant town of Tinker's Dam. It was just sunset, and in that land of mountains, with the wild, rocky barrier to the west, darkness followed close after the real setting of the sun. Already the shadows of night were settling over the little valley.

A smile was playing about her lips, and the love-light in her deep blue eyes told how agreeable were her waking dreams. She had taken this position for the purpose of watching for the coming of her brother, but surely sister never yet wore such a smile when thinking solely of a brother, let that relative be never so dear and near to her heart!

Dinorah's happy day-dreams were abruptly broken by the appearance of Fremont Metcalf, who was advancing with a step unusually rapid, even for him. And as he drew nearer, Dinorah turned a shade paler, for she believed she could detect trouble in his handsome face.

She hastened to meet him at the door, but the hasty query died on her lips as she noted his dark and anxious brow. Instead, with the true instinct of a lover, she murmured:

"Charley—has anything happened to him?"

"No; he's all right, so far as I know," was the hasty reply, as the young man drew her inside and closed the door, with a quick glance around him. "Dan and Molly—where are they? Not within hearing?"

"In the kitchen, preparing supper. Why do you ask?"

Fremont slowly shook his head, his voice lowered:

"I don't like them—I never did. I believe they would sell their Savior for a dollar. I'd get rid of them if we were going to remain here long. But, never mind now. Come into this room. I've got something to show you."

Wondering, Dinorah followed him into the room where first we saw her, and standing close to the window, Fremont drew a bit of folded paper from his pocket, and held it out, saying:

"Read that, and tell me what you think of it, sister."

Dinorah took the paper and hastily glanced over its contents. There were not many words, nor was there either address or signature. It ran thus:

"You and your sister are in danger. Walter Teemer has returned from exile, and swears to bitterly avenge what he terms the wrongs of the past. He means mischief. Be on your guard, night and day. He is like the copperhead—he will strike without warning. Like the copperhead, too, his blow will end in death!"

That was all, but surely it was sufficient?

"It may be only a clumsy joke," said Fremont, when Dinorah glanced wonderingly into his troubled countenance. "But if a joke, the author has covered his tracks with infinite pains. Where do you think I found that note, not an hour since?"

Dinorah slowly shook her head, glancing again at the mysterious warning:

"In the pocket of my coat!" exclaimed Fremont, tugging half-viceously at his drooping mustache. "When it was placed there, how or by whom, I know no more than the man in the moon. I discovered it when I happened to slip my hand into the pocket. I took it out, and was on the point of throwing it away, when I happened to think it might be some memoranda that had better be saved. I opened it and found—what you see. What do you think of it, sis?"

For a brief space Dinorah made no reply, but drew nearer the window, eagerly scrutinizing the handwriting by the fading light. Then with a gasping cry she raised her head, a wild, frightened light in her big, blue eyes, as she gasped:

"Brother! look at it again—look at it closely, letter by letter, word by word! Look—and see if you do not recognize the writing! Oh! can it be—can it be possible that—"

With a sobbing gasp, she crushed the paper into his hand, then turned and fled from the room like one half-demented. And as he stared after her, Fremont almost believed she had suddenly taken leave of her usual senses.

He started to follow her, but paused, hesitated, then stepped close to the window, peering through the settling shades of night over the anonymous warning which had been so strangely delivered into his hands.

The writing was bold and regular, but seeming the work of a hand that had been long unused to the pen, or else of one who was taking pains to disguise his writing.

"That, of course!" muttered the young man, his brows gathering darkly, as he crushed the

note in his strong grasp. "It is like all anonymous things—full of—"

He was interrupted by the return of Dinorah, who bore a letter in her hand; a letter covered closely over with writing turned dim and yellow by the passage of time.

"Take this, Fremont—take this and compare the two!" she hastily uttered, as rapidly adding: "But wait—wait until I light the lamp. It is too dark for you to see what I mean. By the bright light we'll examine them together!"

She hardly seemed aware of her own speech, so great seemed her excitement, and as he stared and listened, Fremont began to partake of her strong agitation, he could not have told why.

Then, when the light was burning brightly, Dinorah held out her hands for the papers, spreading them side by side on the table, saying almost breathlessly:

"Look, brother! Compare the two! Are they not alike? Does it not seem as though the same hand wrote them both?"

At the first glance, her excited speech seemed true. There was a strong resemblance between the two pieces of writing, but only for a moment did Fremont suffer himself to think thus. As he recognized the letter she had brought in, he drove the wild, insane idea away, crying:

"Are you mad, sis? That's the last letter poor father wrote home to mother! How can it resemble *this* one? Surely you have not forgotten how we found—"

He paused abruptly as the sounds of a mellow whistle came in through the open window. And Dinorah uttered a little cry of delight, as she sprung toward the aperture, saying:

"It is Charley—my Charley! He'll solve this ugly mystery for us, never fear!"

CHAPTER III.

AT THE GATES OF PARADISE.

As Dinorah reached the window, the mellow whistle ceased and a cheery greeting came from the shadows without. Then, with an ease and grace that deprived the action of the boyish absurdity which it would naturally deserve, a tall, athletic-formed man sprung lightly through the window, alighting beside Dinorah with a soft laugh, his strong arms clasping her not unwilling form to his bosom, his lips touching hers again and again.

The instinct of true love was not deceived. This was indeed Chispa Charley, at one time King of the Sports, but now plain Charles Hampton, mine boss, and the betrothed of Dinorah Metcalf.

Tall, athletic, powerfully yet gracefully formed, Chispa Charley was something more than a handsome man. His features were quite regular, yet glowing with character in every line and curve. It was the face of a man, in the highest, truest sense of that word.

In complexion he was quite dark, his eyes black as jet and sparkling with life—with love, just now. His face was smooth shorn, his curling hair clipped rather close to his well-shaped skull.

His dress, too, was very unlike that worn by the typical western sporting man, being plain both in cut and material. In the days gone by, while playing his part as the King of Sports, Chispa Charley had dressed gayly enough to satisfy the most extravagant taste, but those days were gone, never to return, as he often told himself, and with them had vanished his past extravagance.

As previously stated, Charles Hampton had played a double role in Canaan and Tinker's Dam, in neither of which was his actual character suspected by his every-day associates. One of those characters lay hidden forever in the bloodstained grave of Tom Degnan; the other he still maintained in part, at least before the eyes of the public. But it was a very much subdued edition of the Chispa Charley the sports of Canaan and Tinker's Dam had known. Since his acquaintance with Dinorah Metcalf, no man had known him to touch liquor or cards. He did not shun his former boon companions, but he never sought them at their old resorts, never joined them in their games or their leisure hours, kindly but firmly declining their cordial invitations, telling them that he had wiped out the old scores, broken the slate, and began a new life.

He took hold of the mine "Better Yet," managing it as carefully and skillfully as though the hand at the helm was still that of Colonel Darius Teemer himself.

The first request made by Dinorah after their betrothal was that he might resign his position as salaried detective in the employ of the express company, and this was granted without a murmur, though Chispa Charley felt that he was abandoning the work for which he was best fitted.

"Well, brother—that-is-to-be," cried Chispa Charley, with a light laugh, as he released the blushing maiden and turned toward Fremont Metcalf, his keen eyes instantly detecting the troubled look on the young man's face; "what is the matter? Your wash-lady dunning you for 'that little bill'? Or has the never-so-fair-as-she somebody sent you a specimen of her skill in the shape of a hand-shoe?"

"I wish it was no worse than that!" muttered Fremont, as he pushed the unsigned note of warning across the table.

Growing instantly sober, Chispa Charley took up the bit of paper and rapidly mastered its contents. His brows contracted as he read, and Dinorah turned a little paler as she heard those strong white teeth come together with a sharp and almost savage click.

"Where did you get this note?" asked Chispa, sharply.

By way of answer, Fremont hastily repeated the account which he had given his sister.

"For the life of me, I can't comprehend how that paper came in my pocket," he added, soberly. "I do not remember having taken it off to-day, and certainly if the paper had been in the pocket last night, I would have noticed it before."

"You had callers at the office to-day?"

Fremont nodded, shortly.

"Of course; much as usual. But no strangers among them. I know them all, and am sure none of them put the paper there."

"But some one did," dryly retorted Chispa Charley. "You were down in the works to-day?"

"Twice. But you know no strangers are permitted there, without being accompanied by one of us. There were only the old hands, and they—"

"May be at the bottom of the affair, any one of them," was the quiet interposition. "Digging and blasting is dull and prosaic work, yet there may be more than one fellow among the toilers of infinite jest."

"Then you think it is no more than a joke?"

"I am trying to think, rather."

Until now Dinorah had not interfered, but as Chispa Charley bent over the mysterious warning, she gently called his attention to the time-stained and finger-worn letter to which was appended the name of Tucker Metcalf.

"Compare the two, Charley, and tell me what you think."

He cast a quick glance upward, and was startled by what he saw in that pale, lovely face. But without a word he took the old letter, and holding the two papers side by side, gazed at them long and closely. Anxiously, almost breathlessly, the brother and sister watched his face, but they could read nothing of his thoughts there. It was like a mask of stone.

He folded up the papers, speaking deliberately:

"There is a resemblance, but no more than might happen any day. I dare say we could find a dozen such among the many letters on file at the office."

"Then you don't think—you don't believe—"

"My dear girl," he said, his voice soft and loving, his touch gentle as that of a woman as his hand rested upon hers, "I only think this: No harm can come to you or yours while I continue to draw the breath of life. Forewarned is forearmed, they say. This may be no more than a clumsy joke, finding birth in a would-be witty brain, or it may be a genuine warning from some unknown but faithful friend, who has good reasons for keeping in the dark. We will believe it to be the last, and will act accordingly. It can do no harm to keep our eyes open and our hands ready."

"In my opinion it's nothing but a silly joke," declared Fremont, after once more examining the warning note. "If there is danger, it can come only from Walter Keever, or Teemer, whichever his real name may be. And he's too arrant a coward to ever return here, after the lesson and warning that was read to him that night at Canaan!"

Chispa Charley slowly shook his head, his strong face even graver than the voice in which he made answer:

"I wish I could feel as positive, but I can't. A coward the young fellow was, I grant that; none but a coward would have acted as he did toward an angel," with a glance into the lovely face beside him. "But sometimes, and under certain conditions, a coward is more to be dreaded than a brave man. The last will almost always give warning before he strikes, but the other—that note puts it clearly—is a copper-head snake, silent, venomous, striking only from ambush."

"If we were only gone—if we were only back in a civilized country!" impetuously cried Dinorah. "I cannot breathe freely here—it is like living all the time in a frightful nightmare!"

"A compliment to you, brother—that-is-to-be," laughed Fremont, mischievously.

"Which is accepted at its proper value," retorted Chispa Charley, smiling at the indignant look which flashed into the face of his betrothed. "Dinorah and I fully understand each other. She is not sorry she came to this benighted region, nor does she regret having fallen into captivity for life; she is only anxious for the day to come when we can turn our backs on Canaan, Tinker's Dam and barbarism forever and a day."

"And not altogether for my own sake," was her addition, her voice low but firm, her face flushing but not abashed. "Why should I try

to conceal my real feelings from either of you? One is a very dear brother, the other—"

"A still dearer husband, or the next thing to it," supplemented Fremont, not unkindly.

"Dearer to me than my own life, at all events," her tone still lower, full of truth and earnestness. "It is for him that I fear the most, for if that wicked wretch means to strike a blow, the first will be aimed at his life!"

Gravely, silently, Chispa Charley lifted her trembling hand to his lips. With Fremont looking on, brother though he was, and in perfect sympathy with them both, perhaps this was the most natural mode of returning thanks.

"If I could only be certain of that, dear, I would never lose a wink of sleep on account of the serpent in human form," he said, speaking lightly, thinking only of driving the clouds from her heart. "I don't pretend to be a paladin, but if Walter Keever, or Teemer, levels his lance against me, he'll bite the dust after the most improved fashion, if I do say it!"

"If alone, or openly, I grant that; but he'll never strike until he can take you at a terrible disadvantage. He will not be alone. He will have plenty of backers. Though that strange warning does not say so, I feel that he is leagued with those other frightful creatures—with Romeo Bugg and his gang!"

She was bending over the anonymous warning as she uttered this last sentence, and so failed to catch the quick interchange of glances which passed between Chispa Charley and her brother. Her words plainly impressed them disagreeably, but before she looked toward either of them again, their faces were composed, showing no signs of their real thoughts.

"You have naught to fear from that gang, Dinorah," said Chispa, quietly. "If they should come back and thrust themselves too prominently on my notice, I'll run them in on the old charge, commission or no commission. No, I hardly believe Romeo will venture back to this region, at least before I have shaken the dust from off my feet."

At this juncture the female servant entered the room and announced supper. The summons was promptly obeyed, the pure air of the mountains giving all a hearty appetite, lovers or no lovers.

At supper but little was said, and nothing that calls for record here. Somehow neither of the young folk trusted the servants kept, though they could point to no particular fault in either Dan or Molly, beyond the simple fact that they were originally engaged by Colonel Darius Teemer.

On the death of the colonel, and when the property changed hands, the servants were found at their posts by the new owners. Dan was a partial cripple, and partly for this reason, partly because it would be difficult to replace them on short notice, the old man and his wife, Molly, were continued in their places, greatly to their apparent joy.

It was not long before both Fremont and Dinorah regretted having so acted, but so long as the servants maintained their respectful behavior and committed no fault, they felt disinclined to turn them adrift, through what might be a mere whim without any foundation on fact. Another reason was the expectation of leaving Tinker's Dam at an early day, when the unpleasant enigma would be solved naturally.

Supper over, the young people returned to the sitting-room. Dinorah closed the windows and blinds, and then they again gathered about the table on which still lay the anonymous note and the old letter from Tucker Metcalf.

Fremont produced a box of cigars, Dinorah having no objections to tobacco-smoke, and seeing how thoughtfully she regarded the unsigned note of warning, he crumpled it up and used it to ignite his cigar, saying lightly:

"Thus ends the vile joke—in smoke!"

"But the memory remains—and the fear, the haunting dread that it may be truthful—that even now the evil man may be making ready to strike his venomous blow!" murmured Dinorah, shivering with a dread that was little short of superstition. "Oh! brother—Charley—if we could only flee from this terrible region! It is torture to remain here! Only for one thing, I would give years of my life had we never seen the abominable place!"

Chispa Charley silently pressed her hand beneath the table, then spoke:

"I did not know you felt it so keenly, Dinorah, or you should have been taken away long ago. You never showed such intense dislike—"

"Because I was ashamed of my weakness, as I called it," was the swift interposition. "I had no tangible excuse for my frightful dread, then; but I have now since that warning note. I would cheerfully abandon all—all but you and brother—if we could only leave here this very night, never to return!"

"That would be worse than foolish," coldly said Fremont. "It would be abandoning all that our poor father sold his life for. It was for us that he worked—for us and for our poor mother. He says so in that letter, the last word that ever came from him. The fortune he speaks of there, must be the same he invested in

the Better Yet. It cost him his life, yet you would throw it away for a mere whim!"

"A whim that can be indulged before long, and that without so great a sacrifice," calmly interposed Chispa Charley. "I have almost completed arrangements for selling the property, mines, house, mills and all, for a fair price."

"There's more money to be made by running the mines and keeping control of the mills," said Fremont, in a tone of dissatisfaction. "The day will come when the Better Yet will be worth double its price now!"

"But you promised, brother!"

"And he will keep his promise, dear," added Chispa Charley. "Indeed, he can't well avoid doing so, were the temptation never so strong for him to go back on the bargain. The trade is almost completed, and the terms are fair enough to satisfy a man more covetous by far than Fremont."

"Then we can leave this frightful place?" eagerly cried the maiden, her eyes glowing brightly.

"Within a month, if all goes well. Before the first honeymoon comes to an end," he added, in a soft whisper, his lips coming very close to her suffused cheek as he uttered the final sentence.

Adroit as was the whisper and the action, Fremont observed it, and rose from his seat with a gesture of mock impatience, as he cried:

"A nod is good as a wink to a blind horse, my tender turtle-doves! I'll intrude no longer. When you descend from the seventh heaven of delight, through the gates of paradise, Chispa, please call me. I would like a word or two with you before saying good-night."

Without waiting to listen to the blushing protests of Dinorah, Fremont took a light and left the room, ascending the stairs to his own chamber on the second floor.

"He's a dear good fellow, little girl," said Chispa, as he very naturally shifted his chair still closer to that occupied by his betrothed. "He deserves to find another treasure only second in value to the one Heaven has given me!"

Never mind the answer she made, nor the manner in which it was received by Chispa Charley. We all "have been there," or will be, some time. And we know, or will know, that there are some scenes which should be kept sacred from all outsiders. But if betrothed lovers, on the very eve of their bridal, both Dinorah and Chispa were sensible bodies, and so, not many minutes after the departure of Fremont Metcalf, the curtain may be drawn up again.

"Then we can leave here?" Dinorah is saying.

"Within the month, if all goes well. The sale is almost completed. It only wants the approval of the company back East, and their signature. They cannot object to the terms or conditions, and I look upon the bargain as already ratified. All the same, I shall breathe freer when the trade is perfected and the money in your possession!"

"But why, if the property is so much more valuable, as Fremont believes?"

"Because Walter Teemer is still living. Because he is the son of the former owner. Because he is no fool, and might decide to place the matter in the hands of some bright lawyer who might, in his turn, give us a little trouble."

"But there is no doubt of our rights?"

"Not a bit of it! The papers prove that clearly enough; but, as I said, a sharp lawyer could give us no little trouble, if young Teemer concluded to try that method of getting even. For that reason I persuaded Fremont to agree to the sale."

Dinorah was silenced, if not entirely convinced. She knew but little of business matters, and trusted thoroughly in the man who had won her first, best heart's love.

Then Chispa Charley diverted the conversation to the all-important event which was to transpire on the coming day. No need to record all that was said. It might sound foolish, read in cold blood by outsiders, though so dear and agreeable to the lovers. But there was one point mentioned by Chispa that deserves a place, if only for the tender thoughtfulness which it displayed on his part.

"You know I have been away all day, Dinorah; but you have not asked me where, or for what purpose?"

"I knew you would tell me, if it was for me to know," was the quiet response, which humility met its fitting reward.

"I went over to Canaan. There I left the chain which in part gave me my title. I gave it to Gabriel Sexton and told him to let the boys melt it up in drinking your and my health. But that was only one reason for my taking the trip. I thought of your lonely position here, darling, and though the ceremony is to be so very quiet and private, how much better you would feel if you had a woman friend to cheer you up. I knew there were none in town for whom you cared, so I thought of asking good Betty Forbes to come over and—"

He went no further, for his lips were sealed by the first kiss which Dinorah had ever given him

unasked. There were tears in her eyes, but they were tears of joy and thankfulness.

Though she had said nothing to that effect, she had deeply felt her loneliness, and the lack of a single kindly bosom of one of her own sex, on which to lean in that time of great, if happy, trial. And she knew of none other in all that wild region who could so nearly satisfy that yearning as Betty Forbes, wife of "Honest John," landlord of the Occidental Hotel at Canaan.

At an early hour, Chispa Charley rose to take his departure, for the hotel in town at which he was stopping. Dinorah called Fremont down, as directed, and the two men drew a little apart, conversing earnestly together in low tones.

Though they affected to make light of that anonymous note of warning before Dinorah, it had deeply interested them both, and their present conversation turned on that point.

"Rest easy, dear fellow," said Chispa, guardedly. "I will neglect no precautions. I'll get some of the boys up and have them keep guard over the house to-night. To-morrow we can make more definite preparations, if needs be."

"It can do no harm, and it is best to be on the safe side, you know," replied Fremont, shaking hands and again retreating to his chamber upstairs, leaving the lovers to make their parting adieux without any looker-on.

These were not to be so hastily said. After all, Dinorah and Chispa were but mortal, and mortal lovers have a fondness for repeating tender nothings over and over again.

But at last Chispa reached the hall door, pausing with his hand on the knob, to add:

"I will call in on the Forbeses before I retire, for no doubt they have reached the hotel long ere this. I proposed that they come direct here, but Betsy would not hear to it. She wanted to get rid of the dust of travel first, and then it would be too late. You might look for her early in the morning, she said."

"If you only knew how grateful I am for your thoughtfulness in asking her!" half-sobbed Dinorah. "I thought of her more than once, but I was afraid you would think me foolishly sensitive, and dare not put the hope into words."

"The time will soon come when you will know better than to doubt me, even in such trifles, darling!" he whispered, as he clasped her once more to his broad bosom.

The last words were spoken, and the door opened. They stepped outside together, standing on the broad stone step, neither one seeing aught of those stealthy shadows lurking so near—neither dreaming that the enemy had already prepared for his stunning blow—was even then about to strike!

Swift and deadly it fell. Just as the arms of the betrothed lovers were untwined from around each other, a dark shadow leaped forward, and a terrible blow descended full upon the unguarded head of Chispa Charley, felling him to the stone without even a gasp or a moan!

And other shadows pounced upon the stupefied maiden, one throwing a heavy blanket over her head, stifling all outcry.

CHAPTER IV.

DOWN TO EARTH, AND LOWER.

"Don't be rougher than you must, but make sure she don't screech out!" came a harsh, husky voice, apparently from the lips of the shadow who had felled Chispa Charley so cleanly.

He was only too well obeyed. The two men who assaulted poor Dinorah seemed adepts in the dastardly business. One caught her around the waist, pinning both arms to her body, holding them thus with one hand, while with the other he gripped her throat with a vise-like pressure. His comrade in evil flung a dense-woven blanket over her head, dexterously twisting it tight around her head and shoulders as his mate withdrew his hand with a parting squeeze.

There was a slight, convulsive struggle, then the maiden's limbs relaxed, and she hung a limp and lifeless weight across the arm of her captor.

A half-stifled curse came from the lips of the man who was kneeling upon the breast of Chispa Charley, as his all-observant eyes noted this, and he grated:

"Curse you! you have killed the golden goose!"

"Only fainted, boss," was the ready reply.

"You are sure?"

"Dead sart'in. The grip I give her wouldn't 'a' cracked the shell o' the thinnest aig ever a goose laid, golden or no, let alone crackin' the machine that—"

An angry growl came from the lips of the chief.

"Cut it short! You are too fond of hearing your own voice, Silver-tip. Let Big-horn attend to her, while you help me put this devil in limboes. He's beginning to squirm a little, and may make mischief enough to put ropes around all of our necks yet, if we don't look a little out."

"Best let me putt my paw onto his head, an' then come down with my hull two-ton, King

Grizzly," muttered the muffled giant, in hoarse, eager tones, as he hovered over the prostrate form of the Gold Nugget Sport.

"Will you obey orders?" sharply growled the chief.

"Sart'in; but ef you want to make me clean runnin'-over happy, jest whisper fer me to bu'st his ole cabeza wide open this once—jest whisper it, boss!"

"Get down to business, you mule-headed—Don't you see he's coming to? If I lose the game through your infernal obstinacy, I'll take it out of— Nail him, I say!"

Barely audible but intensely excited were his tones, as he felt Chispa Charley faintly struggling back to consciousness, and as the final words broke hissing through his clinched teeth, he dashed his fist with malignant force full upon the exposed temple.

The cowardly blow was enough to drive away the slowly returning senses once more, and then the two muffled figures were busy for a few moments over the unconscious sport.

"Good as wheat!" muttered the one who appeared to occupy the leading position among the night marauders as he regained his feet, gazing down upon the bound and gagged form lying at his feet. "It's worked like a charm, so far, and the worst portion of the job is completed. After all, the wonderful Chispa Charley is not such a tough nut to crack!"

"Not when he gits ketched atween two sech hammers es you an' your uncle, boss," chuckled the giant. "Didn't I tell ye I could do him up with one han' tied ahind my back?"

"And lied when you said so, you bag of wind!" sharply grated the chief. "You know you'd no more face him single-handed than you would tackle a full grown silver-tip with only your bare hands for weapons. Don't talk!"

He turned abruptly to where the third rascal stood in one corner of the doorway, supporting the helpless maiden, unheeding the indignant sniff with which the boasting giant greeted his contemptuous reproof.

"How is she, Big-horn? Past giving trouble by using her lungs, for the present?"

"Done fainted, I reckon; ef not, then she's skeered to death," was the prompt, guarded response.

With a hasty movement, the chief slipped his hand beneath the muffling blanket, and stood motionless for a brief space. Then he whispered, in a relieved tone:

"She's all right, and will be herself again in a few minutes. You have the tools I gave you?"

"Sure!"

"Give her to me, and use them, then. We mustn't run any chances at this stage of the game. Work lively, my man!"

Dropping the blanket, King Grizzly held the unconscious girl in his arms, while his assistant hastily but thoroughly applied a gag and bound her hands behind her back. Then he lowered her form to the step beside Chispa Charley, with a low, malignant laugh as he muttered:

"Side by side on the same couch, if that will be any comfort to you, my dainty pair of turtle-doves! Silver-tip!"

"Yar he is, boss!"

"Give the signal for the rest of the Menagerie."

Catching up the blanket and holding it like a rude tent over his stooping form, leaving only a small slit open in his front, Silver-tip partially shifted the slide of a dark lantern thrice in swift succession. Then he closed the slide tightly, letting the blanket drop to the stone step.

Almost instantly there came the faint sound of cat-like footfalls, and then dim, phantom-like shapes came gliding up to the door, ready to obey the will of King Grizzly.

"Spread around the house, and see that no living soul escapes from the building. If any such attempt is made, check it, quietly if you can; but check it, even if you have to use steel, or burn powder! You understand?"

A low growl came in reply, and King Grizzly seemed content. He waved one hand, and the shadows melted away, all save two of the last-comers and the fellows who had aided in the capture of Chispa Charley and Dinorah Metcalf.

"You, Big-horn, will remain on guard here, while the rest of us complete the work inside. Don't let any alarm be made, if you can avoid it. If any one comes to the house, from town, you know how to summon the boys to your aid. Kill or capture all such. We're playing for too big a stake to be squeamish. Come, Silver-tip, Black Wolf and Mountain Lion!"

With a rapid but noiseless step, King Grizzly passed the threshold, pausing for a brief space beneath the full light of the oil-lamp which hung from the ceiling near the foot of the broad flight of stairs leading to the second floor. And truly it was a strange sight which the bright light revealed!

Figures walking upright like human beings; with the human voice and gait; with human feet and hands; but with heads and body-covering such as never yet found nourishment from human flesh and blood!

The mask—for surely it could not be natural, cunningly wrought though the disguise was—

worn by the leader was that of a huge grizzly's head, with parted jaws, revealing the blood-red gums and lolling tongue, in sharp contrast with the double rows of white teeth. It was as though the living head of the mountain king had been transferred to the shoulders of a man, and the deception was rendered all the more perfect by the shaggy hide which covered the bearer to the waist.

Beside him stood the giant, with much the same disguise, only differing slightly as to the color of the long hair, each one of which was slightly tipped with white. The third mask was that of a jetty-black wolf; the fourth the huge, broad-jawed head of a panther, or mountain lion.

The grinning jaws of King Grizzly turned toward his fellows after a momentary pause, and the words came huskily from beneath that hideous mask:

"The young fellow must be up-stairs, in his room. Follow me, and carefully, on your life! We want him *living*; dead, he'd be worth only so much a pound for soap-grease!"

Softly as though shod with velvet, King Grizzly led the way up the broad flight of stairs, like one perfectly familiar with his surroundings. As cautiously his mates followed, their hands ready to grasp knife or pistol in case of need.

Direct to the door of the room that Fremont Metcalf had chosen for his own, proceeded King Grizzly. The door was partially open. Through the aperture shone a clear light, and, stealthily peering through, King Grizzly beheld his third victim sitting at a small table, his head bowed upon his clasped hands, like one dozing or else deep buried in thought.

A silent signal gave his hideous followers the cue, and without a sound to betray his approach, King Grizzly entered the chamber, a revolver drawn and clubbed in his right hand.

Another glance to assure himself that his men were in readiness to second him, should such become necessary, then the chief of the marauders crouched, leaped swiftly forward and struck with deadly force at the bowed head.

A convulsive start—a hollow, gasping moan—a quivering of his limbs—then Fremont Metcalf lay prone across the table, helplessly at the mercy of his bitter enemy.

A stifled yell of devilish triumph burst from the grim mask, as King Grizzly shook his armed hand high in the air.

"That settles it, and the game is all but won!" he muttered, his tones full of a savage, malignant joy. "You thought it a wild and visionary scheme, my gallant fellows. You swore that it could never be carried out as I planned it. You were all so sure that some unprovided-for trump would turn up against us, just when we were the least prepared for it! But what do you think *now*?"

"That you are rightly called King Grizzly; that we are properly your humble subjects," promptly replied the Lion.

"Who shall have a goodly share of the feast, never fear," laughed the chief, clearly not displeased with the flattery. "But let's get down to business. Bind and gag this fellow if I did not strike too heavily!"

He bent over the motionless figure, rudely twisting the head to one side so that he could see the pain-distorted features while his finger-tips were examining the bloody skull. For a few moments, he seemed in doubt, but then a husky laugh came from beneath his hideous disguise.

"I thought I gaged my blow about right. He'll soon come to his senses, with nothing worse than a headache to remind him of his rudely broken dreams. Lion, you and Silver-tip bind and gag the gentleman, then tote him down to the parlor below. Black Wolf, come with me. We must look after the servants."

Together the two rascals descended the stairs, King Grizzly pausing in the hall only long enough to order his band to bear their captives into the parlor, there to await his return.

He passed through to the kitchen, no longer seeming to think there was any need of caution in his movements. He flung open the door, confronting Dan and Molly. With a faint scream the woman shrunk back, half-covering her face to shut out the grim sight; but the man seemed unmoved. And as King Grizzly strode forward, the woman did not seek to avoid his grasp, nor seem very much frightened as he hugged her tightly to his hairy bosom, playfully rubbing his hideous mask against her wrinkled face.

"It's you, then, Master Walter?" she said, with a faint laugh. "At first glimpse, I thought sure it was the Old Boy!"

"Come to remove you for your fidelity to your young master, eh? Never you fear him, Molly! He's too good a friend of mine to injure one so true to my interest as you have proven yourself!"

"An' old Dan, master?"

"A man and his wife are one, Danny, so my speech included the worse as well as the better half."

"We're true to you, master dear—true as steel!" huskily muttered the old man, bowing his head over the hand of the masked chief. "We have done all we could for you, an'—"

"Tell him what we heard, Danny—what we

heard them imps o' evil whisperin' over in the parlor!" cried Molly.

"They's a traitor in your ranks, master—one who tried to sell you out! 'Deed we hearn 'em talkin' it over—hearn 'em readin' an' talkin' of a warnin' paper that Fremont Metcalf brung home with him this very night!"

A bitter curse broke from the masked lips of King Grizzly, and he questioned the old couple closely. They could tell him little more. They had only caught a stray word now and then as Fremont and Dinorah and Chispa Charley discussed the anonymous note of warning; enough to assure them of the main facts, but not enough to satisfy King Grizzly.

"Well, I'll draw the truth from their lips before I seal them up for good-and-all!" he muttered, giving over the useless task. "And now, my dear old friends, I hate to treat you with even seeming harshness, but be sure it is for your own good. You must not be suspected of having a finger in this precious pie, when discovery takes place, or your gray hairs wouldn't be enough to save you from punishment, if not death."

"Never heed us, master, if it can better your case," bravely uttered Molly. "I'd die to give you joy, an' if Danny wouldn't do as much, he'd better never let on to me!"

"Young master knows Danny," was all the old man said; but it was quite sufficient.

The most fluent oaths and protestations could not have gone further, and King Grizzly knew that his part in that dark night's work would never come to light through either of these true hearts—true to him in every pulse, however wrong and mistaken their fidelity might seem to others.

"I'll not make it any harder than necessity for your own safety compels me," kindly replied King Grizzly. "You must be bound, and so pass the remainder of the night. It will be necessary to gag you, also, as a good excuse for your not giving the alarm; but let the memory of my promises help you to bear it. When I come into my own again, be sure you shall share it all with me, my hearts of gold!"

With his own hands he bound and gagged the faithful pair and placed them in as easy a position as the circumstances would permit. While the bonds appeared to be vigorously applied, they were so arranged as to cause but little pain. And both Dan and Molly were prepared to endure that, for the sake of the young master, whom they fairly idolized.

Leaving them thus, King Grizzly and his attendant passed into the parlor, where he found his captives each and all in full possession of their senses, bound, gagged and seated in chairs, side by side. Before them stood the grotesquely-masked marauders, each one representing some American animal, so far as correctly shaped heads and natural skin formed into a sort of cape or short cloak could transform them.

So perfect and complete were the disguises, that a brother might have watched his twin while thus masquerading, without a suspicion of the truth, unless marked by some strong peculiarity of figure. As for voices, coming from beneath those masks, they were strangely transformed, and afforded no clew.

Satisfied that all was right here, with trusty men on guard outside to prevent the approach of any one who might give the alarm too soon, King Grizzly turned away and made a rapid though thorough search in each room, both above and below stairs, taking possession of sundry papers and valuables. He had a number of his men aiding him in this work, but he repeatedly warned them against plundering.

"All that is here, belongs to me, by rights, and the day will come when I will take full possession, or else get the money's worth of all. When that day comes, you shall have your just share. Until then, don't let any stray article stick to your fingers."

In this respect, at least, his word appeared to be law, for not a single article was taken from any of the rooms, save such as he himself kept in his possession. And then, when the search was ended, he returned to the parlor.

Still he did not seem fully content, for he motioned Silver-tip and Big-horn to one side of the room, and whispered in their ears for a few moments. Then, as those two worthies proceeded to search the two male captives, he stood by and watched each article as it came from their persons. Still he failed to find that for which he longed, and with his own hands he searched the dress of Dinorah, despite her shuddering shrinking from his touch. And a muttered curse came from his masked lips as he was once more foiled.

"You have got the best of me in this one point," he said, his voice harsh and menacing, full of a malignant hatred powerless to describe in words. "You have hidden or destroyed the note of warning sent to you by a cowardly traitor. Where have you put it?"

Of course he could expect no plain answer from those sealed lips, but he keenly gazed into one face after the other through the holes in his grotesque mask, hoping to read some clew in them; but in vain. He saw only defiance and hatred in those of the men, fear and aversion in that of the woman.

"So be it, then!" he added, with a harsh

laugh. "When I ask you again, I will have both the time and means to make you speak to the point. For now, take this comfort to your bosoms: The act of treachery to me, cannot avail you aught. And I will surely discover and punish the traitor, just as severely as though his warning had proven the means of saving you and forever foiling my plans!"

He turned toward his men, seeming to be scanning them and making his choice for the particular work they were most fitted for. Only for a few moments did he seem in doubt. Then he spoke rapidly, addressing the man with the lion's head:

"Mountain Lion, you will take the two prisoners to the rendezvous. How many men do you think you will require to make the trip in safety?"

"Only myself, to guard the prisoners, King Grizzly," was the prompt response. "But it is barely possible that we may run across some person or persons foolish enough to want to know the why and wherefore, so—"

"Take five men with you," interposed the chief. "They will be sufficient, if you use common prudence. Select your own men, just so you leave me Silver-tip and Big-horn."

"Any will do, where all are faithful," was the quiet comment. "The five who stand nearest to me, unless you wish some of them to bear you company."

"No; I have no need of them. Take your prisoners."

Mountain Lion stepped forward and placed his hand on the shoulder of Dinorah. Muffled cries of rage and hatred bubbled up in the throats of both Chispa Charley and Fremont Metcalf as they saw this action, and, despite their bonds, they sought to save their loved one. Half a dozen strong hands grasped the brother and held him helpless, while as Chispa started to his feet, pinioned though they were, a dexterous kick sent him headlong to the floor.

Before he could make an effort to arise, the foot of King Grizzly was planted heavily upon his breast, crushing him helplessly back. And with a ferocious laugh the chief said:

"Quiet, you dog! As I hold you under my foot, just so sure will I grind you to powder if you give me any more trouble!"

Bound hand and foot though he was, Chispa Charley strove desperately to burst his bonds or to arise; but as he discovered how worse than useless were his endeavors, he resigned himself to the inevitable, lying motionless beneath that heavy foot, biding his time.

"You know what to do and where to go, Lion," added King Grizzly. "Take them to the rendezvous, and hold them there until I come. Treat the lady with all due respect, and make her journey as comfortable as possible without running any risk of losing her. If it *should* come to that—if by any awkward chance you should see that she *must* escape you—kill her!"

"Your orders shall be obeyed to the very letter, King Grizzly," bowed the Mountain Lion, his grasp tightening on the shoulder of his particular charge.

At a sign from him, Black Wolf came to his assistance, and between them they lifted the maiden clear of the floor, holding her thus despite her desperate struggles to free herself.

A hoarse laugh broke from the lips of the masked chief as he felt those mighty muscles swelling and writhing beneath the pressure of his foot, as Chispa Charley saw the vain despair of his beloved one, and with a motion swift as light, he raised his heavy boot, striking the Gold Nugget Sport a savage blow across the lips with his sole, uttering viciously:

"As for you, surly cur! your time has come! This night settles all the old scores between me and you, *forever*!"

He turned toward the captors of the maiden, and at a motion of his hand they started toward the door. At the same time the other four masks picked up Fremont Metcalf and prepared to follow after their leaders.

At that moment, rendered doubly strong and supple by rage and the sight of his darling in such an evil plight, Chispa Charley bounded to his feet as though under the impulse of a mighty spring. One of the masks uttered a warning cry, and King Grizzly wheeled swiftly, but too late to save himself.

With a hoarse, inarticulate muttering, Chispa Charley, his hands and arms rendered useless by their bonds, lowered his head and adding the weight of his body to the shock, dashed his skull full into the grinning mask of King Grizzly.

With a gasping curse, the wretch was hurled headlong to the floor, Chispa Charley falling on top of him with crushing force. The masks leaped forward and a heavy blow struck Chispa Charley senseless, if not forever ending his life!

CHAPTER V.

KING GRIZZLY SHOWS HIS TEETH.

ALL this took place with such rapidity that Mountain Lion and Black Wolf had not yet borne Dinorah Metcalf out of the room, and the poor girl was a witness to the desperate deed of her betrothed and to his being stricken down from behind by a blow that seemingly crushed in his defenseless skull.

She strove desperately to free herself—to join her fallen lover, to share his fate; but as the strong hands tightened their grasp, and she realized how utterly helpless she was, a merciful oblivion came to the aid of the overtaken brain, and with a gurgling moan the poor girl swooned away.

As his satellites first deprived Chispa Charley of the power of inflicting further punishment, and then dragged his quivering body from that of the fallen chief, King Grizzly slowly, dizzily picked himself up, growling and cursing beneath his bruised mask, the grinning jaws of which were now marked with real blood.

The overgrown fellow who answered to the name of Silver-tip, was crouching over the prostrate figure of Chispa Charley with knife drawn and ready for use, his hideous mask turned toward the chief, his voice rumbling savagely, yet coaxingly:

"Jes' say the word, boss! Jes' give a wink or nod, an' the p'izen warmint'll never no more bu'st his betters in the snoot with his football—'deed he jes' won't, now!"

"Back!" cried King Grizzly, jerking a revolver from his belt and menacing the giant with it as he spoke. "Knife him, and I'll fill you too full of holes to skin!"

With a sullen growl, the sanguinary monster fell back, slowly returning his thirsty blade to its sheath.

King Grizzly laughed, but there was little of mirth in his tones, then added:

"Hold your soul in patience, Silver-tip, and I promise you all the revenge you can possibly desire. The dog shall die, but the death you would give him is too quick, too painless. Long before I am through with him, Chispa Charley shall beg and pray for death as a merciful boon!"

His tones grew thick and indistinct before the last words were uttered, and King Grizzly stepped a little aside, turning his back on the prisoners, lifting his mask a trifle as he did so. He spat out a mouthful of blood, together with a couple of teeth which had been driven from their sockets by that terrific blow in the face from the prisoner's head.

A hissing curse escaped him as he gingerly felt of his bruised and battered face. He feared that his nose was broken; at all events, it was flattened out to a level with his already swollen cheeks.

Dropping his battered mask into place, he turned again.

"Carry them all outside into the darkness," he briefly commanded, following after his obedient satellites.

He told off several of the human animals as guards to Chispa Charley, then bade the remainder spread out in advance and on both flanks of those who were detailed to escort the captive brother and sister to the rendezvous.

"If you sight an outsider, take him, dead or alive, if there is the slightest chance of his making any discovery," was his final order as the members of what he had called his "menagerie" hastened to perform his bidding.

He kept close at the heels of the two men who carried Dinorah Metcalf in their arms, seeming far more solicitous about her safe-keeping than that of her brother.

No words passed between the bold abductors, each one appearing to fully understand what was expected of him, and performing that duty with an eye to nothing else. They left the mansion behind them, heading along the edge of the broken ground where the shadows lay the deepest, as yet beyond the steadily encroaching light of the nearly full moon. And thus for nearly a mile beyond the Teemer mansion before the party gradually drew together and came to a halt.

It was on the edge of a fair-sized clump of trees and undergrowth, out of which came the irregular trampling of iron-shod hoofs, with a single, subdued whimper that told one horse at least had recognized the approach of its master.

"Bring out the animals, men," shortly commanded King Grizzly, himself advancing until he could whisper a few hasty sentences into the ear of the Mountain Lion.

"I comprehend, King Grizzly, and will follow your instructions to the very letter," quietly replied the subordinate.

"See that you do. In her you hold the key to the whole game. Lose it, and our hopes go flickering up the flume! Guard her carefully. Let a couple of your men ride ahead to uncover any skulkers, if a crooked luck has thrown any such in the way. If you should run into trouble, and can't bluff your way out of it, put a bullet through his skull, and give all your thoughts to the girl. Save her if you can. Let the boys tend to keeping the enemy busy, while you think of nothing but slipping through with her. Still, if you see that you can't possibly hold her, seal her tongue forever! You comprehend?"

"You mean to kill her?" slowly asked Mountain Lion.

"I mean for you to kill her," was the stern response.

King Grizzly took the still unconscious maiden from the arms of Mountain Lion while that personage mounted his horse, then returned the fair burden. Two of the marauders started off

in advance, followed more deliberately by Mountain Lion and the rest. King Grizzly watched them until they vanished amid the shadows of the night, then leaped upon the horse held in readiness for him by one of the "Menagerie," whose mask was a frightfully exaggerated representation of a rattlesnake's head, with open jaws, forked tongue and erected poison-fangs.

With less regard for silence, the weird crew rode back to the building where Chispa Charley was held a prisoner, some of them leading extra horses for the use of those who had been left in charge of the Gold Nugget Sport.

"How is our dearly beloved friend and brother getting along, Silver-tip?" asked King Grizzly, as he drew rein beside the guarded captive.

"He's come to ag'in, boss," was the prompt response. "I reckon the 'tarnal critter was borned to be hung, fer it's a dead sure thing you can't knock him in the head fer keeps!"

"So much the worse for Chispa Charley!" with a harsh, savage laugh. "Throw him on a horse, some of you. Cut the rope about his ankles, set him astride the saddle, then tie him fast with a rope beneath the animal's belly. Work lively—but take care the slippery cuss don't make trouble!"

These rapid orders were obeyed quite as promptly as given. Chispa Charley, not yet entirely recovered from his injuries, made no attempt at resistance. Though his brain seemed to be on fire, whirling and dancing, throbbing and singing like mad, he was cool enough to realize the worse than folly of fighting against such odds without a better prospect of success.

He was placed in a saddle, then his ankles were noosed and drawn forcibly together. Another lasso bound him to the high cantle and pomel of the saddle, after which a man jumped up behind him, managing the reins with one arm passing on each side of the prisoner.

When satisfied that all was safe, King Grizzly gave the word to march, and the grim procession moved rapidly away from the Teemer mansion, pursuing a course almost at right angles with the one taken by those who escorted Fremont and Dinorah.

Though their progress was much more rapid than had been deemed prudent with the first party, King Grizzly did not altogether neglect caution, sending some of his grim Menagerie on in advance, to make sure the way was free. But this was only while they were in the immediate vicinity of Tinker's Dam. When that was left at a safe distance behind them, there was little danger of meeting with travelers, and King Grizzly urged his horse on until the advance scouts were overtaken.

Not a word was uttered by the marauders, while Chispa Charley, gagged as he was, of course could say nothing.

The comparatively level country was soon left behind them, King Grizzly leading the way into the rocky and unbroken region lying to the north of Tinker's Dam. Though there was no regular trail visible to the eye, he seemed perfectly familiar with the lay of the ground, never for a moment appearing at a loss which one of the winding defiles to follow, pressing on at a goodly rate of speed, like one impatient to reach the destination his mind's eye had in view.

Chispa Charley's brain grew quieter and his wits more composed as the journey continued, and though he took care not to arouse the suspicions of his captors, he took careful note of their course and surroundings. Before long he was able to recognize their present whereabouts, and from that time on he kept the lay of the ground clearly defined in his brain. He saw that King Grizzly had veered sharply to the northwest, and knew that they were every moment drawing nearer to Canaan, though, unless another change of course was made, they must eventually pass that camp to the north.

As they proceeded, through the still night air came a faint roaring sound, as of a considerable waterfall, and with a hoarse cry, King Grizzly touched up his horse and leaped out into a comparatively smooth and level road.

Closely followed by his human animals, he galloped on until a sharp turn in the road brought them into full view of a comparatively broad and rapid stream of water, glittering like a band of molten silver beneath the bright light of the moon.

A fierce curse burst from the masked lips of King Grizzly as he wrenched up his horse, glaring savagely through the holes in his battered mask.

Directly before them, in the center of the stream, was the figure of a man, stripped to his shirt, the moonlight falling athwart his face as he stared in startled amaze at the totally unexpected vision. Only for a moment. Then he floundered hastily through the water for a few yards, squatting down behind a boulder that showed above the surface.

Only for an instant did King Grizzly hesitate. Then, with another savage curse, he drew a revolver, plunged spurs rowel deep into the flanks of his snorting horse, dashing forward and into the river, closely followed by half a dozen of his men, prominent among whom was Silver-tip, the giant.

With a howl of terror and despair, the bare-legged wanderer broke cover and started to flee,

still clinging mechanically to his bundle of ragged clothing, splashing the water in silvery drops high in air as he frantically floundered along toward the further shore.

"Halt!" thundered King Grizzly. "Halt or die!"

His revolver cracked spitefully as though to emphasize his stern commands. A whining cry escaped the lips of the poor devil thus surprised, and he dropped on his knees as though struck by the bullet. But it was only the influence of fear, for, still hugging his bundle of clothing close under his chin, his teeth chattering like castanets, he wailed:

"Fer the good Lawd! don't shoot! I give up!"

King Grizzly wrenched up his horse, just in time to keep the iron-shod hoofs from trampling the trembling wretch, but there was little mercy in his demeanor as he leaned forward and thrust the muzzle of his pistol into the face of the man.

"Who are you? Spit it out—or croak!" he hissed, viciously, when he was startled by a coarse burst of laughter from Silver-tip, who cried:

"Ef it ain't Windy Johnson, I'm a howlin' liar right from head-waters! Don't waste a bullet, boss, on the likes o' him!"

"What do you mean? Who is he?" sharply demanded Grizzly.

"Jes' a two-legged bag o' wind, boss," was the prompt reply. "The likes o' him cain't do us no harm. Ef you was to turn him loose, an' he was to live to git to other human critters, he'd sw'ar that he run a muck through a thousan' giants, each one bigger'n a mount'in! The *durn'dest* blower this side o' whar they makes the wind storms, an' *sech* a liar that his own daddy would take oath snow was black, ef he said it was white!"

King Grizzly listened to Silver-tip, but all the while he kept the trembling wretch under his pistol, following that wagging head with a hand as steady as that of fate itself. He seemed on the point of pulling the trigger that would surely scatter the brains of poor Johnson to the waters. And for a few moments it was a toss-up what would be the result, life or death.

"He may tell too much, if let go free!" muttered King Grizzly, half to himself; but those fear-sharpened ears caught the words, and in quavering but earnest tones, he gasped:

"As heaven hears me, sir, I'll only tell what you give me leave to say! I'll take my oath if you like—I'll be your slave, your dog, anything—only spare my life!"

"And if I bid you say nothing? If I swear you to forever keep secret what you have this night beheld?"

"They may tear out my tongue with red-hot pinchers, and I'll never breathe a syllable! I swear it, if only you'll—"

An abrupt change came over King Grizzly. He lowered the hammer of his weapon and replaced it in his belt, saying:

"After all, I reckon I can make use of the rascal. Bring him to land with you, Silver-tip!"

With a chuckling laugh, the giant urged his horse forward and stooped in his saddle, then straightened up with a wild yell, spurring his steed on through the shallow water. One bony hand was buried in the rough hair of the frightened wanderer, who shivered and moaned as he was brutally dragged thus to land, all the time hugging his bundle of rags to his bosom.

With yells of mirth, the Menagerie followed, of them all only one pitying the poor wretch, and that one was himself a bound and helpless captive.

When dry land was reached, Silver-tip released his captive, but it was only to wheel around when his horse carried him a few yards away, to circle a lasso over his head.

Windy Johnson had scrambled to his feet, presenting a most ridiculous spectacle in his abbreviated costume, his thin and bony shanks, by no means too straight, trembling and knocking together at the knees as he hugged his bundle of clothes.

The lasso shot forward, encircling his body, and laughing recklessly, Silver-tip tightened the rope, looking toward King Grizzly as though for further orders.

"Bring him with you," was the brief comment. "We're going to the Lone Tree."

Touching his horse with the spur, King Grizzly led the way through the moonlight, his course being at an acute angle up the river, through a rocky and rugged hollow.

The sound of the waterfall came more clearly to their ears, and was evidently at no great distance above the ford. But Chispa Charley gave that fact only a passing thought. He had caught the words spoken by King Grizzly, and he remembered the Lone Tree.

It was a stout-boled though low cedar, growing on a rocky plateau less than a mile from the ford. It was the only tree of any sort within miles of that spot, from which fact came the title by which it was known far and wide.

A harder, sterner light came into his black eyes as he was carried helplessly on, as he believed, to his doom. Though unable to make a fight for his life, he could meet death like a true man, and thus lessen the triumph of his dastardly foe.

King Grizzly drew rein beside the Lone Tree, leaping to the ground and throwing his reins to one of the Menagerie.

"Take the horses out of the way and hitch them. We'll be detained here some little time, unless this dainty sport dies of fright before we get fairly started," he said, with a nod of his grim-masked head toward Chispa Charley.

"An' this bag o' wind, boss?" asked Silver-tip, dragging in his lasso hand-over-hand until Windy Johnson was drawn up within reach of his hands. "Shell I punch a hole into it, jes' to see whar the wind comes from?"

"No; I have found a better use for him," replied King Grizzly, drawing near the trembling wretch, his voice taking on something like kindness as he added: "Come, my good fellow; don't rattle your bones apart with fear. You sha'n't be hurt, if you prove true to your pledge."

"I'll do anythin' you ax, mighty sir—anythin' to save my life," was the whining response.

"Yet it don't seem as though it could be worth much!" half-contemptuously muttered King Grizzly. "Ragged, starved, without home, money or friends; growing old in—bah!" with a short, hard laugh as he cut himself short, adding sharply:

"All I ask of you is this. Watch closely all that you see done here to-night! Take such note that you can repeat it all as readily as though you were reading from a printed page. This is enough for the present. Before you and I part, I'll give you what further instructions I may see fit."

"Then my life is safe?"

"Safe as though you were in heaven, or some other seaport a million miles from the nearest sinner!" was the laughing response.

"Then I may put on my clothes?"

"Do as you like," impatiently. "Only mind: if you try to sneak away before I give you full permission, these beautiful pets of mine will fill you so full of holes that the foul fiend may use your carcass as a skimmer to purify his broth!"

His teeth still playing a trembling tune, but with his scattered wits and courage slowly returning, Windy Johnson limped a little to one side and meekly proceeded to dress himself, making no answer to the jeering taunts and witty observations of the playful animals composing the Menagerie.

At a sign from King Grizzly, Chispa Charley was released from the saddle, and lowered to the ground. For one brief moment he resolved to escape, but only to abandon that wild hope as he found his limbs were so benumbed by the tight bonds as to be perfectly helpless.

He was dragged to the Lone Tree, and by order of King Grizzly, bound firmly to it by a lasso passing many times around his body. Then the thongs securing his arms were cut and those benumbed members drawn around the bole of the tree, to be again securely tied at the wrists. Then King Grizzly advanced and with his own hands cut loose the gag that until now had kept the prisoner's jaws widely distended.

"Now, Chispa Charley, I've got you where I swore I'd have you, sooner or later!" he uttered, with a venomous laugh. "When I took that oath, I was down in the mud, while you were on the very pinnacle of success! It seemed a thousand to one against my ever making the rifle, but I watched my chance and took it when it came my way. And now—here we stand, face to face, for a settlement of all old scores!"

"Where is your boasted record now, you dog? Where is your charming bride? And this your bridal eve! Glorious, isn't it?"

Viciously he laughed, shaking his clinched fist in the face of his helpless enemy.

"Think of it, dear fellow! Only this morning you were the great and only Chispa Charley, King of Sports. You were the Top Notch of Tinker's Dam; for well we both know that Fremont Metcalf was little more than a figure-head, a weathercock that turned as you lent the wind. You called the Better Yet your own, with all the rest of the property you stole from the rightful owner—the man you murdered like a wild wolf! You had all this—and more. You were to marry the woman who one time smiled on me—who listened to and returned my vows of love with still warmer protestations—who poured her kisses over me, free as air!"

He paused in his hissing taunts to laugh venomously as those black eyes flashed into his. But not a word spoke Chispa Charley, and the dastardly villain resumed:

"To-morrow you were to wed her. To-morrow was to seal your wildest hopes of happiness. You were all-powerful. You had almost attained the height of happiness. And I—a disgraced and branded outcast! I, with the marks of the scourge still blood-red on my back!"

"But now—how does the case stand? Where is your power in which you prided yourself? Where now is your dainty bride? Tell me that, you double-faced plotter! You hound that hunted better men to their bloody graves. You paid head-hunter! Tell me that, curse you!"

Still no reply, save that steady, burning gaze that seemed to penetrate the hideous mask behind which King Grizzly had hidden his face.

"Still stubborn? Then let me answer for you. Your power is gone, vanished like smoke. Your bride is in my hands—is mine to use or abuse as I may see fit. Mine to marry or degrade, just

as the fancy strikes me. And who am I? You should have guessed the truth long ere this, if craven fear has not blunted your old penetration. For fear it has—behold!"

As he spoke, King Grizzly flung aside his mask, revealing a face that might once have been handsome enough, but which was now distorted by hatred and rage, bruised and inflamed, covered with blood from that crushing blow.

"Look well, Chispa Charley! It is I, Walter Teemer, son of the man you hounded to his grave! When we met last, you were on top, and I at the bottom. But now—my turn has come!"

Still not a word from those lips, but Walter Teemer started back with a snarling curse, as Chispa Charley spat full in his face!

CHAPTER VI.

THE MENAGERIE BREAKS LOOSE.

It was all he could do—the only way in which he could show his intense scorn and loathing, his fierce defiance and reckless disregard of the power which the masked villain so exultantly boasted, without giving Walter Teemer more pleasure than pain or anger. To retort in words was just what the malignant plotter wanted of Chispa Charley, and the steel-nerved sport would not give him even that brief triumph. Instead, he took the one other course that was left open to him, and it stung sharper than a knock-down blow in the face.

Hissing forth bitter curses, Walter Teemer staggered back from the bound captive, reeling like a drunken man for an instant, his blood turning to fire in his veins as he realized what had happened. Then, with a wild cry, he flashed forth a long knife, and crouched for a leap which should avenge the silent insult with death. Crouched, then leaped forward, the bright steel gleaming in the clear beams of the full moon!

And not until that metallic glitter cut a half-circle through the air did Chispa Charley deign to speak. Then he cried aloud, his voice filled with mingled scorn, hatred and defiance:

"Strike, you worse than cowardly cur! Strike, before the sting of that insult dies away, and your blood turns to stagnant water at the mere thought of facing a man, bound hand and foot though he be!"

Swiftly as those bitter words leaped from the lips of the King of the Sports, death would certainly have cut them short, only for an unexpected interruption. The gleaming steel was already descending straight for the throat of the helpless man, when a bony hand shot out and caught the wrist of maddened King Grizzly, checking the stroke just in the nick of time.

Of all men, it was Silver-tip, the giant, who interposed to save the life of Chispa Charley!

In his amazement, King Grizzly suffered the weapon to drop from his unnerved hand, staring wildly at his audacious follower for a brief space, then gasping:

"You hound! how dare you check me? How dare you interfere? Back! out of the way, or I'll cut you down first!"

"Think twicet, boss, an' then ef you kin say them words over ag'in, it ain't Silver-tip as'll stop the way," hurriedly uttered the big mask, relaxing his grasp gradually, only to have Walter Teemer tear his wrist free and snatch at a revolver in his belt.

"You dog!" he snarled, fairly insane for the moment, his eyes ablaze, his bruised lips tinged with froth; "I'll send you first to tell the foul fiend to make ready for him!"

But Silver-tip was not quite ready to take up his last trail, and with a celerity of motion marvelous in one so big and heavily built, he gained the rear of his chief and pinned both of his arms to his sides, lifting him clear off the ground and holding him helpless as a pinioned child, saying rapidly:

"It's fer your own good, boss, an' you'll thank me for't when your common senses come back ag'in. You don't want to kill your inimy all in a secont, does ye? You want to tortur' him so's to pay back the licks you got at Canaan, don't ye? Think it over fer five minnits, an' then ef you don't give in that I'm actin' as your best fri'nd, I'll fold my arms an' take the dose you measure out to me 'thout even makin' of a mouth to show its bitterness. Jes' five minnits, boss!"

The furious struggles of King Grizzly ceased, and in a more natural tone of voice he uttered:

"You're right, Silver-tip. I was mad, and knew not what I was about to do. Let up, old man. I've got my sober senses back again now."

"You're dead sartin, boss?" a little dubiously asked the masked Hercules, lowering the chief until his feet touched the ground, but still maintaining his advantage in case of need. "You're dead sartin you ain't holdin' a grudge ag'in' the ole man fer his impudence in—"

"Shall I swear it to you?" half-laughed the king, as he twisted his neck until he could look into the face of the giant. "I tell you, man, I thank you for checking my hand!"

"It was durned impident, I'm free to 'fess as much, boss," Silver-tip muttered, half-abashed,

as he relaxed his grip and fell back a pace, seemingly satisfied that no harm was intended, but for all that standing on his guard. "But I knowed you didn't raaly mean fer to shet off his wind in sech a hurry. I knowed you'd be sorry fer it as soon as did, an' fer that reason I tuck the liberty."

"For which I thank you now, before all the Menagerie," said the king, his voice raised so that all might hear and comprehend. "When opportunity offers, I will thank you to better purpose, Silver-tip. Until then, I am your debtor."

A little murmur ran through the ranks of the masked men. Not one of them all had offered to interfere, though each hand had instinctively sought a weapon, ready to draw and use them without hesitation should their chief give the word. They expected to see Silver-tip suffer for his audacity in thus boldly frustrating the purpose of King Grizzly; they were amazed to hear him elaborately commended and thanked instead.

Walter Teemer turned away from the giant and stooping, picked up his knife, replacing it in the scabbard at his side. He also regained the hairy mask which had fallen to the ground, and carefully resumed the disguise before speaking further. When this was fairly settled in place, he strode forward and confronted Chispa Charley speaking hoarsely:

"That vile act has not bettered your case any, Chispa Charley, though it may not make your punishment any the more severe—for that would be impossible, with only one life to lose. Still, it is one more notch in the score set down against you, and shall be wiped out with the rest."

The steel-nerved sport stared steadily into the battered mask before him, his square jaws firmly set, his lips tightly compressed as though to hold back the flood of hot words that struggled for utterance.

So at least King Grizzly appeared to interpret it, for he struck them several times with his unclosed hand, sneering:

"Let it out, Chispa! Curse a bit and then beg—beg like the dog you are for mercy! Beg, and maybe your prayers will be heard—in heaven!"

Not a word, not a sound; only that fierce, steady gaze that seemed enough to burn its way through the cunningly contrived mask and put its mark anew on the battered and bruised face which was hidden there.

King Grizzly felt that steady glare almost as much as he had the contemptuous salute of a few minutes earlier, though he tried all he knew to hide the fact. It was betrayed in his nervously closing and unclosing hands, in his uneasy movements, and in his unsteady voice that almost choked him.

"Time enough for begging, after all. I'm in no particular haste, with nearly the whole night before me. It would spoil sport were you to break down too soon."

"Look you here, Chispa Charley—Old Forked-Lightning—Ha! that touches you, does it?" he laughed, as the prisoner gave a barely perceptible start at his last words.

It was but for a second; then the captive was sternly impassible as at first, with his burning gaze riveted upon the chief of the marauders. Only one who was watching him as intently as King Grizzly could have detected that slight and fleeting emotion before it was subdued.

King Grizzly laughed mockingly as he spoke again:

"Well carried off, Chispa, but your boasted nerves failed you long enough to show how true were my suspicions. The common crowd believe that Old Forked-Lightning was buried in the grave filled by Tom Degnan, but you forget that I was partly behind the scenes, in those troubled days gone by. However, let that flea stick by the wall for the present."

"Do you wonder why I have taken all this trouble? Why I have brought you so far away from the spot where I captured you, if I meant to kill you? I might have done that on the spot, you think? Ay! so I might; but I mean to do more than simply take your life. Sudden death will not cover over the deep and bitter scars of the past. You must suffer something of the pangs that tore your soul as well as body! Shall I show you those scars? Ay! I will. You shall see them, one by one, and from their number forecast the fate that awaits you!"

His voice grew hoarse and strained, and as though fearing to trust himself longer within reach of his hated foe, King Grizzly turned abruptly away, striding swiftly to and fro, his hands clinched, his teeth grating audibly beneath his mask.

In silence the members of the weird Menagerie watched him, taking care to keep out of his path as he thus wrestled with himself. His fierce and bitter passions seemed to awe them, and each one stood ready to dodge or ward off a blow in case the mad humor of King Grizzly should thus seek to vent itself.

For several minutes Walter Teemer thus wrestled with himself, gradually gaining the upper hand of his surging passions. Then, his voice cold and hard, his tones even and measured, he returned to the tree where Chispa Charley helplessly waited his doom.

"I promised to lay bare my scars to you,

Chispa Charley. It may be some faint satisfaction to you to know that you have had your revenge beforehand, that your life has already been paid for!

"Not so many months ago—though it seems ages, to look back at it from this standpoint!—I was prosperous and happy as the average run of mankind. I was young, fairly educated, not hideous in either face or figure. Does that sound like idle boasting? I cannot help it. I am speaking no more than the simple truth.

"I was the only child of a man who stood high in the estimation of the public. He was rich enough to satisfy the most exacting. He was kind and indulgent. He was all a son could wish for in a father.

"You know who I mean, Chispa Charley. You have not forgotten Colonel Darius Teemer. You have seen sufficient of him, have heard enough, to know that I am speaking well within the bounds of truth and reason.

"Among the rest of his possessions, Colonel Teemer numbered the rich mine known as the Better Yet. His skill, his energy, his money and pluck rendered the property a thousand-fold more valuable than it was when it first came into his possession by—"

"By the basest of fraud and the blackest of crimes! By forgery and murder!" sternly interposed Chispa Charley.

"And saying so, you lie in your throat! But I expected no less than to hear the thief cry robber. Guilty of those very crimes yourself, you think to blind all eyes by bringing the vile charges against a dead man! It is bold and manly—so very much like the gallant and chivalrous Chispa Charley, gambler, bloodhound, paid spy and salaried sneak! The fire-eater who angers an adversary in his proper person, then buries himself beneath gray hair and pretended madness as safeguards until he can strike his victim down by a stab in the back!"

Fiercely came the words, and for a brief space it seemed as though King Grizzly was on the point of succumbing to the unreasoning rage which had so nearly cut his revenge short. But with a violent struggle he gained control of himself, his voice once more cold and measured.

"I have told you what my position in life was, when we made discovery of a cunning and unscrupulous plot against our property, if not our lives. You understand what I allude to. You had a finger in the pie, and now you are just beginning to feel the burn.

"You know how we fought against it—how we met our open and our secret foes. You were the worst of the latter class. You bore a double face, and it was only when too late to ward off your treacherous blows that we learned the whole truth and saw you as you really were.

"Never mind the details. They happened not so long ago as to have faded entirely from your memory as yet. You won, through bitter black perjury, through assassination! You won, and I lost—lost everything but life—for you did not even leave me honor!"

"Honor is good—from *your* lips!" laughed Chispa Charley, his lips curling, his black eyes all fire.

"Patience, my dear fellow," said King Grizzly, with wonderful self-control for him. "I will explain the meaning of the word to you in due time, and tell you how it was taken from me by your tools, at your commands—whispered in secret for you dared not utter them aloud where all could hear.

"You or yours murdered Jay Flicker. You and yours finally swore the deed on an innocent man. You manipulated things so cunningly that all who looked on from the outside were ready to swear black was white. You see, I give you full credit for your skill and adroitness.

"You managed to get Fremont Metcalf free. You trumped up a monstrous tale of finding a skeleton with papers that carried with them possession of the Better Yet. They were rank forgeries, as you know only too well, both now and then. And to make that forgery hold water, you butchered poor Tom Degnan, torturing him until he promised to swear to the story you so carefully prepared for his dying lips. You murdered the rightful owner of the property. That left only me in your path. You removed me—and how?"

Once more that mad passion choked the voice of the man who was thus distorting truth in his own behalf. King Grizzly turned aside once more and fought over that killing fight, not glancing toward his helpless prisoner until the victory was again his. Then he resumed:

"You could prove nothing criminal against me. Even your diabolical ingenuity failed you there. You knew that if it should come to an open fight, your abominable crimes must surely come to light. You feared to murder me, as you murdered Jay Flicker, as you killed Tom Degnan, as you hounded my poor father to his death. You knew that the public would revolt at such cold-blooded atrocity; and so you struck at me with a hidden hand!

"It was by *your* orders that the lynchers tore me away, escorted me beyond the limits of Canaan on a sharp-edged rail. It was by *your* orders that they tore the clothes from my back and bound me to a tree—by *your* orders that

they lashed me as though I had been a runaway slave or a sheep-killing cur, rather than a man, white and free-born! Ay! by *your* orders, Chispa Charley, the devils lashed me until my back was one mask of blood! Until I was more dead than living! By *your* orders they put me in a pickle of salt and vinegar, then ordered me to flee the country never to return, under penalty of death by the rope. All this I suffered, and by *your* orders! And for what cause? For naught save my standing between you and an immense fortune in mines and money!"

King Grizzly paused, his voice fading away in a hoarse, gasping curse. Chispa Charley spoke sharply:

"You lie, Walter Teemer, when you charge me with crime or sinning against the right. You and your tools were the criminals. I only defended the innocent, and defeated the guilty. I never caused your flogging. Instead, I saved your life from the justly-excited and enraged citizens when they discovered the dastardly part you had played in that affair. I begged them to set you free, to spare your life, to simply order you out of the country. If they went any further, that was of their own accord, and I knew naught of such punishment."

Chispa Charley ceased abruptly as a harsh laugh came from behind that grim mask. Once more his lips closed firmly, and he seemed again a flesh-colored statue rather than a man who knew that his time was well-nigh upon him.

"Ha! ha! I thought you would remember the use of your tongue, stoic though you pride yourself on being! The beginning is admirable—but why stop so short? Whine and pray! Beg and plead for mercy, why don't you? Still silent? Very well. We'll see if we can't touch the spring again. Silver-tip, do your duty. Work lively!"

With a hoarse laugh, the giant stepped forward, drawing his knife and using it to cut and slash the clothing from the broad shoulders and back of the prisoner, without disturbing the ropes that bound him to the tree-trunk. When his task was accomplished he drew back, and King Grizzly stepped forward until he could peer through the holes in his hideous mask full into the pale, hard features of the captive sport.

"I have told you what I suffered at the hands of your tools, Chispa Charley. Even while they were lashing me—even while the hot blood was streaming down my lacerated back—I took a most sacred oath to never die, to never know rest or peace until I had caused *you* to suffer the same degradation! And now I am about to make that vow good! Now I am about to show you how it came that I lost even my honor—for one who has been lashed like a dog, even though innocent, is dishonored in the sight of his fellow-men!"

For the first time since his capture, Chispa Charley showed signs of strong emotion on his own account. His face flushed hotly, the great veins swelling on his temples until it seemed as though they would burst through the skin. His lips curled away from his grating teeth, and the words came hissing through the strong white barrier:

"Think twice, Walter Teemer, before you lay the lash on my back! Kill me—you have the power. *Strike me, and I'll kill you!*"

A mocking, jeering laugh broke from King Grizzly.

"I thought I could find the spring! Go on—beg and pray and plead, you hound! Whine and cringe—it is sweeter than music to my ears! More precious by far than even the love-whispers which await me when I have disposed of you and fly to claim my bride—the dainty Dinorah! And as I clasp her to my breast—as I stifle her with hot kisses, between them I will draw your picture—I will repeat your vain whining, your prayers, your tears of agony and fear!"

He paused with a muttered oath, for once more Chispa Charley was the man of marble. His face was cold and set hard as granite. If he could not bring death to save himself from the lash, he would die in silence. He would conquer thus far!

King Grizzly turned abruptly away and strode to where stood Windy Johnson, now rightly clothed, though still trembling and plainly far from feeling safe or comfortable. Grasping him by the shoulder, the masked chief led him to a spot from whence he could see everything that transpired, speaking rapidly:

"Now you see why I spared your life back yonder at the ford. Take your stand here, and open your eyes. Watch all that happens, and write it down in your brain. Keep note of every groan and cry that escapes his lips, and remember it is Chispa Charley who utters them! Count every blow, and repeat them to the men of Canaan."

At a sign from King Grizzly, Silver-tip handed him a lasso, one end of which was doubled and knotted. At another sign, the Menagerie fell into line, each right hand holding a rope ready for use. And then, loudly counting, pronouncing the number *one*, King Grizzly whirled the rope through the air and brought the knotted end across the bare back of Chispa Charley

with all the power lent a strong arm by hatred more bitter than death!

And following the cruel stroke, a red and livid ridge rose on the white skin of the helpless man!

King Grizzly turned abruptly to the left, while Silver-tip stepped into his tracks. The chief said *two*, and another red ridge made its appearance.

And so the cruel, dastardly torture proceeded. One after another the masked men advanced and left their mark, King Grizzly counting each blow in sharp tones, eagerly watching for some token of pain or yielding on the part of his victim.

But none such greeted him. Cold, seemingly insensible to pain, though the blood was now trickling down his back as the harsh knots broke the skin which covered the bruised flesh, Chispa Charley stood as proudly silent as at first. Only his blazing eyes which never once left the form of his arch enemy, told that he felt aught.

Again and once again the round was made, until King Grizzly pronounced the number nine-and-thirty. Then he flung aside his bloody rope, with a hard, irritated laugh.

"That is the number your tools counted when I filled a place similar to the one you now occupy, dear fellow! I swore to return those blows to the one whose will, if not his hand, laid them across my shoulders. It is only justice I want. I would not stoop so low as to wreak revenge on a *dog*—and adding another figure would be equal to that."

He turned to Silver-tip, who laughed malignantly as he hastened over to where his horse was hitched, quickly returning with a small sack, which he handed King Grizzly. With a rapid movement, the latter drew forth a handful of salt and cayenne pepper, roughly brushing it across the bleeding back of Chispa Charley—to start back with a low cry of fear!

That wild, fiery glare seemed to pierce his very heart!

CHAPTER VII.

MORE FIEND THAN MAN.

THOUGH the pain caused by that diabolical preparation to his raw and bleeding back must have been frightfully intense, must have been far beyond the power of cold words to describe, never a moan or cry escaped the firm-set lips of the King of the Sports. There was no quivering or twitching of the horribly abused flesh. It seemed as though the iron will of the tortured man had really rendered him insensible to physical pain. But that he keenly felt the degrading touch of the lash was clearly shown by the fierce, almost insane glow which filled his black eyes as they glared at the mocking, jeering King Grizzly. So frightfully menacing, so full of an undying hatred and vengeance were they, that the masked chief shrunk from those eyes as though they possessed the power of striking him dead in the midst of his barbarity.

But not for long. A sense of shame enabled him to quickly recover himself, and with a coarse, brutal laugh, King Grizzly returned to the charge. But it took him longer to regain full command of his voice, and it did not require a very close observer to read how bitterly he was disappointed at this final failure to wring a cry or a moan of agony from the lips of the being whom he hated so intensely, so insanely.

"So ends Act I! And as the curtain descends for a brief breathing spell, permit me, my dear fellow, to congratulate you on your superb acting! I'm only sorry I can't grasp your honest palm, the better to emphasize that congratulation, but for the moment we'll have to take that part of the ceremony for granted."

He paused, and looked as though he expected Chispa Charley to make some sort of reply; if so, he was disappointed. Not a word or sound came from those lips, drawn so tightly over the strong teeth that they showed almost white in the moonlight. Only that steady, burning gaze told that Chispa Charley still lived, still felt and suffered and thirsted for vengeance on his merciless foe.

"If ever I said aught against your having nerve and plenty of it, Chispa, I'm ready to take it all back now. You *have* got nerve of no ordinary quality, else you must have broken down when that cooling-plaster touched your lash-scarred back! You see, I am willing to give you all the credit you can justly claim," with a short laugh that stung more keenly than the bitterest curse. "An uglier-looking back I never saw on mortal being than this same one of yours! And when it heals up, if your life holds out that long, there will be most lovely scars and purple ridges left to bear eloquent witness to the plain truth of your words when you tell the story of this night! And if all other means of getting a living should fail you, you can cork your face and fire the abolition heart anew by lecturing on the evils of slavery, illustrated by your own grid-iron pattern—devil a one among them all would ever doubt its coming from the cruel whip of a Legree!"

The human animals composing the Menagerie roared with laughter, as in duty bound when the king beast of them all set the example, but it may be doubted whether King Grizzly enjoyed his triumph half as much as he pretended.

If only he could wring a cry, a moan, a sign of pain from those close-set lips! If that fiery glare would only dim or change! If those locked lips would only part to utter a prayer for mercy—or even the bitterest curses and hottest defiance would be better than that steady gaze that seemed to burn and freeze his heart at one and the same time!

King Grizzly turned to the ragged witness, saying:

"You have taken notes, as I bade you? Good! See that you tell the story straight when you stand before the men of Canaan, and do not forget that the hero's name is Chispa Charley. I thought your message would take a slightly different color; I thought that the dandy sport would break down and beg and whine and plead for mercy, when he felt the lash cutting through his white skin; I thought both the pain and the shame would sting sharper, but now I know that the double-face dog has felt the whip before! Tell the men of Canaan as much—swear that no living man could have borne in silence such a flogging unless he had felt the lash more than once at the public whipping-post! You will remember this?"

"It's big odds I couldn't fergit ef I wanted to, ever so bad, your honor," muttered Windy Johnson.

Silver-tip burst into a loud laugh, then said:

"Never fear fer Windy, boss! Sence he's begun fer to offer odds, he's got his wits back ag'in. I was heap oneasy fer the ole critter, but I ain't so no more. He'll kerry your words straight as a string, I'll go bail!"

"If he fails, I'll strip his bones as bare as were his shivering shanks when we first caught him!" growled Grizzly.

Turning away from Johnson, the masked chief drew his long knife and cut away the ropes that held Chispa Charley to the trunk of the Lone Tree, stepping back a pace and coolly folding his arms.

The tortured man's hands dropped to his side, for the moment helpless from long-obstructed circulation. He took one step backward, then stood like a statue, still with that strange gaze riveted upon the masked chief. Then his fingers began to twitch and quiver as the swiftly-coursing blood drove away that dull, paralytic sensation that rendered his arms more feeble than those of an infant for the time being. And for the first time his burning gaze shifted from the figure of his arch-enemy, glancing swiftly over his surroundings.

King Grizzly stood the nearest him, and he was several feet away. The masked subordinates were partly whispering between themselves, partly looking listlessly around like men wearied with the drama thus far played. But this carelessness was too apparent. Chispa Charley saw that each man held his lasso, but with the noosed end in each right hand, instead of the other end with which the flogging had been done. And this fact showed him the cunning trap into which it was intended he should rush headlong.

A short, hard laugh parted his lips as he folded his arms over his swelling bosom, fixing that burning gaze once more upon the hideous mask which concealed the face of Walter Teemer. Then he spoke in cold, contemptuous tones:

"Not yet, you human hyena! I'll never cut my own throat until after I've killed you!"

Taken utterly by surprise, King Grizzly stammered:

"I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

"You lie when you say that," was the cold retort. "You released my arms thinking that I would try to escape or to kill you. But not until you had given your hounds their cue, and made sure they could lasso me before my hands could close about your throat. Bah! you have not wit enough to deceive a natural born idiot!"

"And you—are by far too sharp to live!" laughed King Grizzly, trying thus to hide his discomfiture, for Chispa Charley had rightly interpreted his purpose in thus seemingly giving him a chance to escape.

He hoped by that means to shake if not entirely destroy the dogged resolution taken by the King of the Sports. If he could induce him to make a break, either for freedom or for revenge, only to be checked by the ready ropes of his Menagerie, he fancied that wonderful nerve would give way, at least for a time. And he would give much for that to occur. Thorough as he meant his revenge to be, it would still be lacking if he could not make Chispa either beg or rave and curse.

As he spoke, King Grizzly raised one hand, and instantly several slip-nooses fell over Chispa's head and shoulders, closing tightly about him, and being drawn from opposite directions, holding him perfectly helpless.

"That was your last chance. You refused to accept it, and it is withdrawn forever. Now we'll get down to sober business, and wind up our affairs as quickly as may be.

"Not that I mean to soil my hands with your blood. I am not over dainty, but that would be one step too far for me. If you die before the coming of the next sun, it will be by suicide, or by the hand of fate.

"You should know me by this time. I am the son of my father, the man you and yours hounded to his death. As his son and only child, I naturally became heir to all he possessed at the date of his death. The principal item of that fortune, as you know, is the mine called Better Yet.

"Though I have been lying pretty low ever since that black night in Canaan, I have kept myself thoroughly posted as to your movements. Not a move did you make but what I could read its purport quite as clearly as you could yourself. I know that you have been very anxious to leave Tinker's Dam, and to take with you the fruits of your crimes. You dreaded my homecoming, armed and protected by the law. You laid your plans to make that coming end in a bloody grave. You set your tools on guard, and had I returned openly, they would have cut me down before my lips could denounce you as you really are."

"You have a truly brilliant imagination, to give it no harsher name," sneered Chispa as King Grizzly paused. "Or are you talking for the benefit of the men of Canaan, through your honest mouthpiece, Windy Johnson?"

"I am telling the simple truth, as you are well aware," was the cold retort. "Of course I expected you to deny it. It would be too much to look for a candid admission from such an adept at underhand work. But let that pass for now.

"I chose my own method of getting even with you and yours. I came home under cover and you see the result as far as I have gone. Thus far, the cards have run my way.

"You have made arrangements for selling the Better Yet, the mills with all their machinery, the house and furniture; all save the less valuable claims which are yet to be examined by the company with which you are in communication.

"That property rightfully belongs to me, and when it is sold, the price must pass into my hands. The hour it becomes mine, will witness the restoration of Miss Dinorah Metcalf to liberty, unharmed, unsoiled, just as she was before I placed my hand upon her this very night. But until then, until that money is placed at my disposal, she remains in my power, to treat with courtesy if the right pledges are given; to use or abuse if those who value her the highest should prove stubborn.

"Don't make any mistake, Chispa. I want you to see the situation exactly as it is, before I bid you adieu and leave you to your fate—to life or death, as the fates may decide.

"Dinorah Metcalf is wholly in my power, utterly at my mercy. One time, and not so many months ago, I loved her as a man loves the woman he hopes to make his wife. Then I would have cut off my hand and plucked my tongue out by the roots before the one should harm her or the other utter a single word to give her pain. But you drove all such thoughts out of my heart with the lashes that scarred my back! You made me a merciless enemy to her, as well as to yourself! And now, if the terms I offer are not promptly accepted, she shall suffer ten thousand fold what I have made you undergo—though after a very different fashion!

"I am telling you this, in case the fates should decree that you are to live through the coming ordeal. If they do not prove favorable—if you are to die—then I will set Fremont Metcalf at liberty to carry out and conclude the sale you have begun."

With that sentence, King Grizzly turned abruptly away, making a sign that was promptly obeyed by the members of the grim Menagerie whose lassoes hampered Chispa Charley. Keeping the ropes taut, they moved away from the Lone Tree, leading toward the river, the direction of which was plainly indicated by the subdued roar of the cataract.

Chispa Charley made no attempt at resistance. Though he had every reason to believe that he was being led to his death, after some frightful fashion, he saw how useless it would be to attempt to fight against such overwhelming odds until the last moment of grace was expiring. Then—

He saw that the Menagerie was dividing, one-half of their force, under the lead of one representing a rattlesnake, mounting their horses and riding rapidly away in the direction of the ford where Windy Johnson was captured. The other moiety, with King Grizzly and the gaunt, ragged witness, headed direct for the river, leaving their horses behind them.

Steadily on through the moon-lighted night, the roar of the waterfall growing more and more distinct with each advancing step. Chispa Charley, guided by this sound, and perfectly familiar with the lay of the ground about them, thanks to his past experience while acting the half-mad Old Forked-Lightning, knew that King Grizzly was leading the party directly to the precipitous bank where it overlooked the cataract, and his busy brain tried to divine what part that waterfall was destined to play in the final act of which his enemy had spoken. Tried, but in vain. But he was to discover, all too soon!

King Grizzly paused on the very brink of the rock wall which overlooked the fall, making a silent signal which his human beasts promptly

interpreted. Though not a hand was placed on Chispa Charley, he was so held by the lassoes as to be unable to lift a hand to make a motion which they could not check as soon as attempted.

Beside him as he stood on the verge of the canyon, but just beyond reach, King Grizzly flung one hand out and downward, calling the attention of Chispa Charley to the moonlit scene below their station.

"Look at it well, dear fellow," he said, his voice barely rising above the roar of the tumbling waters. "This is the setting of the second act—may it not prove to be the final one for you!"

Though perfectly familiar with the scene, on which he had often gazed, by night as well as by day, Chispa Charley mechanically obeyed, all the time trying to divine what was to be his connection therewith.

The river was by no means a great one, though just at present it was more than usually swollen, owing, no doubt, to recent rains in the mountains whence it came.

At this point, the banks rose into rock walls that gave it the appearance of a river flowing through a canyon. The spot where Chispa now stood, was nearly fifty feet above the level of the swiftly rushing water. Until within a few feet of the water's edge, the wall was absolutely perpendicular. At that distance began an irregular slope, forming a sort of broken ledge, where a human being might obtain footing in case of need.

A few yards to the left, or below the point where they stood, the foaming waters leaped over a fall of some twenty odd feet, boiling and bubbling, tossing and tumbling over and over in masses of foam above the huge rocks and boulders that at times of low water were barely hidden at the base of the fall. And as his eyes rested upon this, a faint chill ran over Chispa Charley as he realized how quickly a human being would be crushed and bruised and pounded out of all semblance to humanity should he ever pass over that fall. Life would instantly be extinguished by those merciless rocks.

Averting his gaze, his eyes rested for a moment on the one object that broke the even curve of water where it first started to take the leap. Almost in the center of the river, but a few feet above the cataract, a black rock reared its damp and slimy head, not more than a foot above the whirling waters. It was only a scant yard in diameter, almost circular in form, but with a flat and level top.

A short, hard laugh broke from the masked lips as King Grizzly, closely watching the eyes of his intended victim, saw them rest upon this rock. And then Chispa Charley began to catch a glimmer of the terrible truth!

"You are looking at that rock," he said, his voice ringing with a poorly concealed triumph. "Do you think a man could stand on its top for eight hours at a stretch?"

"He might, if the inducement was sufficient," coldly replied Chispa Charley, with his iron will smothering the thrill of sickening horror that crept over him.

"I am glad you think so, even conditionally," mockingly retorted King Grizzly, "for you are fated to make the attempt long before your hair turns gray! As for the inducement—surely that will be sufficiently important, since it is no less than life itself."

"There is only one thing that can make me fail."

"Which is?"

"An opportunity to kill you before I make the attempt," was the cool response. "I shall not die until after I've killed you. That is sworn to."

"And, like many another vow, doomed to be broken. Still, I hope you may pass through the ordeal with life. I am not yet fully satisfied that I have balanced our old account. If you live through this night, I will study up some other little amusement for you—after you have met my conditions, to which I now ask your close attention.

"If you live through this night and escape from yonder rock, bear in mind what I have told you. Complete the sale of the property belonging to me, and hand over the proceeds. I will see that you receive full directions for the delivery.

"One more caution, which you had better clearly impress upon your memory. If you escape, beware how you or your friends attempt to discover the hiding-place of Dinorah Metcalf! You cannot make a step unknown to me. Your every action will be noted and passed on to me as soon as taken. If you attempt to lead a party to her rescue, or in any way try to discover her or my place of retreat, that action will doom her to death—or worse!"

He paused, but Chispa Charley said nothing.

"You have evidence in my work done this night, how little I count the cost when my mind is once set on gaining a certain end. Dare to fly in the face of this, my last warning, and you seal her doom, you sign your own death-warrant! Though the act sets the whole community against me—though it ends in my own destruction—I will kill both you and her!"

"Will you give the pledge I ask of you?"

"I promise nothing save to kill you, dog! Do your worst!"

Even as he spoke thus defiantly, Chispa Charley gave a start as he caught sight of moving forms on the other wall, directly opposite. King Grizzly saw this, and laughed mockingly.

"Never think it, Chispa! Those are some of my beautiful pets, ready to take a hand in your wonderful tight-rope act! Ready, lads! Let's get down to sober business, now!"

"Bet yer life we jes' will, boss!" chuckled Silver-tip.

CHAPTER VIII.

"GRITTIER THAN A GRINDSTONE!"

"AND you, my dear Chispa? Have you no parting message to inquiring friends and relatives? But one word, one sigh, one farewell kiss and caress to assure the divine Dinorah your last thoughts were of and for her? Not one?"

Mockingly King Grizzly leaned toward the prisoner as he uttered these questions, but even then the wonderful nerve of the Gold Nugget Sport did not forsake him. He saw it was a final effort to try him, to tempt him into a vain endeavor to assault the jeering speaker. He knew that to do so would only result in affording his captors amusement, without resulting in a particle of good to himself or injury to the mocker, so completely was he held at the mercy of those whose strong hands grasped the lassoes.

"Still stubborn and sulky? Well, it will go hard but the precious pet shall have some sort of message, if I have to do the pathetic myself," added King Grizzly with a coarse laugh.

He made a sign, and Chispa Charley was drawn back a few yards from the escarpment, his feet knocked from under him and he suffered to fall heavily to the rocky ground. Strong hands caught him by the feet and shoulders, holding him helpless while the loops of the lassoes were being cast off. And then his hands were bound behind his back, when he was forced to assume a sitting posture.

With his own hands King Grizzly passed the end of a selected lasso around Chispa Charley's body, directly beneath the armpits, slipping the rope along until its center was wound thrice around the swelling chest. Drawing this as tight as his strength would permit, he knotted it with great care, at the same time keeping up a running fire of remarks, now full of devilish triumph, then changing to mock pity.

"If one of those knots should happen to slip, at a critical moment, I greatly fear me, dear fellow, you'd never live to receive the congratulations of your friends and admirers on the successful termination of your wondrous act! Ah, you flinch! Did I hurt you?" with mock sympathy and solicitude. "Lay it all to my agitation at thoughts of the frightful peril you will insist on facing! You know I would cut off my right hand before it should give you one intentional pang!"

With a last tug at the knots, King Grizzly rose and turned toward the canyon, on the further wall of which now glowed a small fire. Around it, seemingly watching the movements of their leader, could be distinguished the party sent across the river by way of the ford.

Standing out where the brilliant moonlight rendered his motions plainly visible, King Grizzly lifted one hand above his head and made a deliberate signal. A moment later he saw that it had been rightly interpreted, though the roaring of the swiftly-rushing waters in their contracted channel effectually prevented the sounds of the human voice from crossing the canyon.

He saw Rattlesnake step aside a few paces from the fire, then make a violent motion with his right hand. Though nothing more definite could be distinguished by even his keen eyes, King Grizzly knew what to expect, and with his men he eagerly watched and listened. Not for long. A slight thump was heard only a few steps from the brink, and, quick as a cat, Silver-tip leaped forward and grasped a small stone that seemed on the point of sliding back into the river.

"Have you got it, Silver-tip?" eagerly asked Grizzly.

"You bet I jes' hev!" grunted the giant, rising up and shaking in triumph a stone to which was attached a slender but stout cord.

"Carefully, then!" added King Grizzly. "Draw it in until the rope comes over. Carefully, but lively, now!"

Silver-tip obeyed, pulling the string in hand over hand, while King Grizzly, kneeling on the very brink of the canyon, peered eagerly across the river. Like a spider's web he could just distinguish the black line as it dipped lower and nearer to the foaming white waters, and a half curse escaped his lips as he saw it suddenly caught and whirled out of sight by the mass of leaping waters forming the cataract.

He sprang to his feet, just in time to see Silver-tip jerked to his knees, great as was his bodily strength. But the masked Hercules clung to the cord that cut deep into his horny hands, holding his own until the weight of his chief was lent him. Then the rope was torn up through the falling flood, and briskly drawn across and upward until the willing hands of the human beasts could catch the knotted end.

"Ef I wouldn't as lieve pull ag'in' a full-growned bull-gine as that cussed water, may I never see the back o' my neck ag'in!" puffed Silver-tip when the victory was finally won.

"Then how high would you rate your chances of pulling through with breath in your carcass, if you had to stand on the slippery top of yonder rock, for eight long hours, your arms bound behind you, while both ends of that rope hung in the water—the center of it tied around your body?"

King Grizzly slowly put this question, his voice purposely clear and loud enough for Chispa Charley to hear and understand each and every syllable.

"The—good—Lawd!" gasped Silver-tip, each word popping out as though shot from a gun.

"You don't mean it, boss?"

"Wait and see," with a cruel laugh.

If Chispa Charley heard and understood, he made no sign. His face was as hard-set and unreadable as ever. His blazing black eyes steadily followed the movements of King Grizzly, apparently seeing naught else.

Walter Teemer felt that frightfully intense glare more and more acutely with the passage of each minute, until it actually began to be a torture to him. He felt that his own nerves were giving way; instead of his conquering Chispa Charley, the King of the Sports was gradually but surely breaking him down!

He fought angrily against the feeling, but he could not throw it off, and this, perhaps, rendered his speech and actions more brutal than they otherwise would have been.

Under his orders, a lasso was knotted to one of the ends left free when he secured that rope about the body of his intended victim, then the other end was passed around a point of rock conveniently near. This done, with his own hands, while Silver-tip and his mates kept the rope which they had drawn over the canyon taut, he took the slack end and fastened it to the opposite end of the rope encircling Chispa Charley.

He stood erect and moving into the clear moonlight, made another signal to his men opposite. Then he spoke:

"Slack up, Silver-tip! The rest of you look to it that the lasso don't slip from that rock—so!"

Little by little the strain increased on the body of the doomed man, until the entire weight of the sagging rope came into play, dragging him flat against the ground.

King Grizzly laughed fiendishly as he snarled: "That's only a drop in the bucket, Chispa! Wait until the machinery gets fairly to working! Wait until the ground slips from beneath you, and no longer aids you to resist the strain! Then you will learn that a rope can do more than hang or flog a man, if rightly applied."

Not a word spoke Chispa Charley. Still that fiery glare scorched the merciless villain despite his assumed composure.

"Ready with those lassoes, men!" irritably cried the masked chief. "Time is passing, and it would be a shame to keep our honest friend from his triumph. Get down to work—and see that there's no danger of your knots slipping!"

Apparently quite as eager to complete the deed as their chief, the members of the Menagerie worked with deft fingers, adding lariat after lariat to the one which kept Chispa Charley from being dragged over the canyon wall. When a sufficient number were knotted together each one tested by the strong arms of half a dozen men, Silver-tip said:

"We're ready fer to do our sheer, boss, whenever you be!"

Before he made reply, King Grizzly strode over to where Windy Johnson was watching the peculiar drama with starting eyeballs. Tapping him on the shoulder, he said:

"Come with me, my good fellow, and keep your eyes open. I want you to take in everything, so you can post the gallant men of Canaan when the proper time comes."

Meekly Windy Johnson bore the grim chief company to the verge of the rocks, on the right hand side of the rope, trembling and very unsteady about the knees, very dry and parched about his lips and throat.

King Grizzly waved his hand around his head, and instantly there was a stir among the members of the Menagerie on the further wall. The rope rose a trifle, and then—

"Steady, lads! Get a good footing, then cast off from that rock! All ready? Now!"

While his mates braced their feet, grasping the rope with firm hands, one of the masked men threw off the turns of rope.

With a swift drag Chispa Charley was drawn almost to the edge of the canyon wall before they could resist the heavy strain of the sagging rope. Then a gesture from King Grizzly made them hold their own for a brief space, while he stooped over his cruelly tortured victim, whose body seemed on the point of being cut in two by the frightful strain.

"How do you like it, as far as you've got, my dear fellow?" the merciless villain asked, in a tone of mock sympathy and tender solicitude. "I trust it will not quite kill you! Just shut your eyes, and try to imagine it is the arms of

your fair and dainty bride embracing you! Good-by, Chispa! It's only eight hours till day-dawn!"

Another moment, and Chispa Charley slid over the escarpment, his feet dropping below the level of his body with a force that must have rendered the strain around his chest something horribly excruciating.

Foot by foot he sunk lower, the Menagerie letting the rope pass through their hands in strict obedience to the signs of their master. At the same time the party on the other side of the canyon hauled in on their end, dragging the silently swaying body out from the rocks, over the roaring waters. Lower and lower, until it seemed as though the dangling feet of the doomed man must be caught by the whirling, roaring element long before he could be dragged to the rock in the center of the stream.

"Steady, lads!" muttered King Grizzly, hoarsely, his voice hardly recognizable, so intense was his excitement. "Hold your grip! He's dropping too fast! Hold firm, if it cuts him in two—not another foot until I give you the word!"

"Hold she am, boss!" grunted Silver-tip. "But ef Chispa gits to the end o' this journey with anythin' bigger than his backbone fer the rope to hug, then a full-growned grizzly wouldn't hev no aidge onto him in a huggin'-match—no!"

"Dead or alive, he's got to get there!" grated King Grizzly as he leaned over the wall of the canyon and eagerly watched the result.

Slowly the dangling figure rose as it was dragged outward. Foot by foot—upward and outward—until the strong rope hummed dully as the air parted against it!

Not a sound came from the lips of the doomed man. Was it possible that he had already succumbed to that killing pressure? Had the cruel plotter over-reached himself, and given his victim too short a death, horrible though that must have been while the torture lasted?

Walter Teemer began to fear that this was the case, and behind his mask he gnashed his strong teeth with fury. But he suffered nothing of his thoughts to escape him as he once more gave the signal to his men to slacken their end.

It was a difficult piece of work, but every detail had been carefully studied and provided for beforehand. Long days before he dealt his first open blow, Walter Teemer had been at work, and when the hour came, it found him prepared at every step.

Slowly but surely the body of the King of the Sports drew nearer the rock in the center of the river, and though his feet more than once came perilously near the sweeping waters, one touch of which would assuredly tear their victim from their grasp or else break the rope that they clung to, as often was the danger avoided by prompt obedience to the orders of King Grizzly, either by hand or lips.

And then, when those strong-armed men were almost exhausted by the heavy labor, a yell of exultation broke from the hidden lips of their chief, for Chispa Charley struck the black rock with his feet!

It seemed as though he was standing erect of his own volition, as the men at either end of the lassoes held their positions in obedience to the signals of their chief. But it was only the steady strain that kept him thus rigidly erect. It would have done so, even were he a senseless corpse.

"Steady there, Chispa, old fellow!" shouted King Grizzly, with a ferocious laugh, though it may be doubted whether his lungs were powerful enough to overpower that sullen roar. "Put a little starch into your legs—stiffen your backbone—for now comes the tug of war!"

He paused, with a sharp cry. Was it possible? Did he see Chispa Charley slightly turn his head toward that side? Could it be possible that he had undergone that frightful ordeal without even losing his senses?

"Cursed if I don't believe it!" he snarled, forgetting his recent fears and regrets. "He's alive and conscious!"

"Ef he is, enemy or no enemy, I will say the critter is a man clean through!" muttered Silver-tip, half-defiantly. "Ef he is, then he's grittier than a grindstone big as a house!"

"Silence! and steady at the rope!" growled King Grizzly, with a fiery glance toward the bold speaker. "We'll settle the question at once. Be ready to slacken the rope as you feel it give from the other side."

He made a signal to the opposite party, then bent eagerly over the verge to scan the result.

The full moon was now riding the heavens almost directly overhead, casting its silvery light fairly upon the river, rendering the black rock and its inhabitant distinctly visible.

Slowly the tense rope was slackened from each side, and King Grizzly fairly held his breath as he saw how Chispa Charley swayed slowly from side to side as the terrible strain was lessened a trifle faster from one bank than from the other.

Still there was no saying for certain whether he was alive and conscious for those first few seconds; but then the masked chief drew a long rasping breath as he distinctly saw the Gold Nugget Sport move his feet, separating them

the better to support his own weight and that of the sagging rope!

"He's alive! Well, the devil *does* guard his own, for a fact!" cried the chief, standing once more erect. "Slacken away, lads, but not enough to let the water catch the rope, as yet. Since he's held out so far, we'll give him all the chance we can. Let him have time to regain his breath."

A corresponding order was conveyed to the party on the opposite bank, by a wave of the hand, and while his men were thus occupied, King Grizzly improved the fleeting moments by giving Windy Johnson his final instructions as follows:

"The play is about ended, so far as you are concerned, my honest fellow," he said, gripping the bony arm with his strong hand to command full attention. "You have paid close attention to it all, as I bade you?"

"I'm bettin' big odds I couldn't fergit a mite ef I was to try fer a month!" huskily replied the man.

"Don't try. I want you to remember it long enough to repeat word for word, act for act, all you have seen and heard to the men of Canaan," was the harsh retort. "It is now ten o'clock. We'll give you a lift on the road to Canaan, perhaps, though you could make it on foot by one o'clock; some accident might detain you by the way."

You will go direct to Gabe Sexton's place, Grave. You'll find a goodly crowd there, looking to the wedding set for to-morrow. You will go in, and watch the clock. Until one, keep your jaws tightly locked. If you breathe a hint of what has happened here to-night before the clock strikes one, I will learn of it, and hunt you down to a worse death than awaits him! Swear that you will obey—swear that you will keep this a secret until after the clock strikes one!"

Windy Johnson sunk upon his knees, frightened almost out of his thin wits by the stern tones of King Grizzly. He took the oath as prescribed, and the masked chief expressed himself as satisfied.

"I believe I can trust you. If you betray my confidence, say your prayers in a hurry, for you'll not have time after I find you! Now, get up and listen to me."

"When the clock breaks the seal I have placed on your lips, tell your story. Tell them all you have seen and heard, save one thing. You have not seen the face of one of our party. You have not heard a name belonging to any one of us. You have not recognized a voice or figure. Am I right?"

Windy Johnson nodded, too badly frightened to speak.

Good enough; bear it in mind. If they ask you who we are, tell them 'The Rocky Mountain Menagerie!' You need conceal nothing further, and if they order you to lead them to the spot, do so if you like. Then, if Chispa Charley is rescued alive, I absolve you from all vows. As he can speak my name, you are free to swear to it—but not until he does. Once more, do you fully understand what I want of you?"

In a tone that gained strength and clearness as he proceeded, Windy Johnson repeated his instructions without omitting a single item of moment. King Grizzly nodded his approval, and tossed the fellow a few golden coins.

"Put those in your rags, and let them keep your memory fresh, my good fellow. I shall hear how you perform your mission, and if it is rightly performed, I'll line your pockets still more liberally."

Windy Johnson greedily picked up the gold, and drew to one side, no longer trembling, for he knew that his life was in no danger.

King Grizzly strode to the edge of the canyon. Chispa Charley was still standing erect on the black rock. Forming his hands into a sort of trumpet, the chief shouted at the top of his voice:

"Steady, Chispa! Brace yourself for the tug of war! It's life or death with you now!"

He had no means of knowing whether his words reached the ear of the King of the Sports or not. Certainly there was no motion of the bound figure that indicated they had.

Drawing his knife, King Grizzly held it up in the bright light of the moon, moving it so that it cast a sort of reflection across the river, then making a motion as of cutting the rope. As he gazed, he saw Rattlesnake imitate his action, and knew that his meaning was fully comprehended.

"Steady, lads, or you may all take a tumble!" he laughed, as he drew the keen edge across the rope, severing it clean, then darting to the edge of the rock wall to watch the result.

He saw that Rattlesnake had promptly imitated his action. He saw the falling torrent catch the sagging rope, and then whirl the severed end past him so swiftly that it hissed sharply through the air. He saw Chispa Charley bend forward for one instant as he felt the terrible strain, and his lips parted to utter a yell of mingled regret and fierce joy—but ere the sound could emerge, he beheld the King of Sports draw erect, then bend backward as though about to plunge headlong into the water where it washed against the upper side of the black rock on which he stood.

"Grittier than a grindstone, by Jehosaphat!" he heard a hoarse voice repeat close beside him. "But he *cain't* make it—it ain't in mortal flesh an' blood to hold out ag'in' that, *long!*"

The ends of the rope could no longer be seen. Only by the keenest watching could they distinguish two thin, dark streaks that led from the bound figure on the rock, down the cataract, to lose themselves in the masses of foam and spray.

Still Chispa Charley stood on the rock, one foot a little advanced, the other thrown back, silently, bravely fighting against the fierce tugging power that sought to drag him down to certain death.

And intensely as he hated him, Walter Teemer felt something almost like admiration swelling in his bosom!

"It's him for it, now!" he growled, angry with himself for that gleam of weakness as he turned abruptly away from the thrilling scene. "Get your animals and take saddle! Our work is not yet completed. Off with you, my pets!"

Without a word of remonstrance, without a single backward glance, the Menagerie obeyed his harsh orders.

After him limped Windy Johnson, one hand fondling the bits of gold in his pocket. It was the best night's work he had ever done, and he was quite ready to complete the task assigned him by this man monster.

The horses were regained and prepared for long and hard riding. In silence King Grizzly leaped into the saddle, his grim Menagerie following his example. At a motion of his hand Windy Johnson climbed up behind one of the masks, and then the weird cavalcade set off down the canyon, heading for the ford where they were rejoined by the rest of the band.

And alone on the black rock, Chispa Charley fought in silence the terrible battle, for love, life, revenge!

CHAPTER IX.

THE MEN OF CANAAN UP IN ARMS.

"SING, OR CROAK!"

Never within the memory of man had Gabriel Sexton spoken so fiercely, looked so resolutely, or acted with such desperation as now, his plump and white right hand thrusting the muzzle of a cocked revolver full into the face of Windy Johnson, while with his left he shook the bag o' bones until one could almost hear the skeleton rattle inside its wrinkled envelope.

"Two to one ye don't shoot!" spluttered Windy Johnson, the ruling passion strong even in the face of death.

He shrunk away from the grim muzzle, crooking his elbow as a partial shield, ducking and dodging with his head, but otherwise making no effort to escape from his assailant. And doubtless that was his wisest course, though Windy Johnson was too badly frightened to either think or reason out that fact.

More than half-drunk, on fire with enthusiasm for the man whom he was more than proud to call his friend, Gabriel Sexton was more dangerous just then than if he had all his life been a professional fire-eater. Had Windy Johnson attempted anything like a serious struggle, the fatal shot would most certainly have been discharged.

Fortunately for both parties concerned, perhaps, a tall figure entered at the swinging doors opening on the street, and taking in the scene at a glance, leaped forward and took the dangerous weapon from the hand of the fat avenger by a peculiar and dextrous twist.

"Lend me the gun fer a bit, ef you please!" he uttered in a clear, not unpleasant voice, as he performed this feat. "I'll give it back to ye when ye want it right good."

"Who the— Dave Long! Glad to see ye! Come, take something and—hurray for Chispa Charley! Hurray for the light o' his eyes—the divine creature who's caught him on a string that leads to the altar! Hurray for the wedding—and I'll climb all over the man that says he won't do it!"

It was a comical sight for those who knew the usually prim, precise, and dignified ex-undertaker. To see Gabriel as he stood midway between still trembling victim and the bar, his fat legs widely spread to maintain his perpendicular, his round body shaking like a mound of calves'-foot jelly in its struggle against the laws of gravitation. To see him, with silver-fringed head held stiff and erect, one stumpy arm thrust out at a stiff angle, then raised to twirl an imaginary hat, his bald pate tipping backward until his ruddy pug-nose pointed straight to the ceiling, while his lips opened to give vent to one of those sharp, explosive sentences, after which, like some automaton with rusty joints, he would as abruptly return to his original position until he caught breath for another explosion. It was comical enough, and the saloon rung again with boisterous laughter, even somber Dave Long joining in with the rest.

Gabriel stared around him with drunken ferocity as he uttered that savage threat, his fishy gaze pausing dubiously as it reached the face of Windy Johnson. Already he had forgotten the cause of his sudden explosion, but not

so some of those there congregated, and who were not yet satisfied with the exhibition.

"Make him sing, Fatty! Don't let him bluff you off so!"

Windy Johnson tried to slink away during the confusion, but his purpose was detected and instantly blocked. The hilarious revelers cut off his retreat by forming a line between him and the door, laughing, jeering, cursing and howling, the majority being pretty full of bad liquor by this time.

His head held stiffly erect, his chest thrown out like that of a turkey-gobbler displaying his charms before a favorite hen, stepping high and deliberately, planting each slippered foot as though it weighed a stone, Gabriel Sexton advanced on the trembling wretch.

"Last warnin'—last call—sing or croak, feller!" he shot out in vocal bullets.

Windy Johnson shrunk back, only to be pushed forward by the man in line within reach of whose arms he came.

"Deed I *cain't* sing, gents!" he whined, the picture of mingled misery and low cunning. "I don't know a note from a hole in the ground, nor I hain't got no ear fer music, *anyhow!*"

"You can talk if you can't sing, and that's the sort of music we want of you just now," said Donald McLean, his voice ringing out clear and stern. "You've said too much not to say more. Chispa Charley has fallen into trouble, if not by your means, to your knowledge, and you've got to spit out the whole truth, kick and squirm as you may!"

"I'll grind his bones to powder if he declines!" added Gabriel, in an awful tone.

"I *cain't*—deed I *cain't* speak a word afore the clock yender strikes one!" whined Windy, licking his dry and feverish lips as he glared around him like a cornered wild beast. "I'll be bloody-murdered ef I say a word afore then!"

"And gory-slaughtered if you don't!" rumbled Gabriel.

Dave Long, Marshal of Canaan, listened to these swift-following sentences with wonder and perplexity, striving to divine the subject in dispute, but his brow contracted quickly as the name of Chispa Charley was mentioned by the stalwart young miner, and seemed to think that the proper time for his interference had arrived. He strode forward and dropped one hand heavily on the shoulder of the cowering wretch.

"What's all this about, Windy? You haven't been mixing yourself up with anything like mischief, have you?"

"Deed, no, Dave; 'deed, I jes' *hain't!* It's on'y them makin' game o' the old man—the graceless critters!"

"Ask him about Chispa Charley," sharply interposed Donald McLean. "Ask him why he bet money that Chispa wouldn't be married to-morrow—that his bride wouldn't be at the place appointed on time—or if she was, that Chispa himself would not be there to meet her! Ask him that, marshal!"

Windy Johnson stole a glance toward the clock, and gave a gurgling groan of misery when he noted the position of the hands. Deep down in his heart he cursed his greed that had hurried him into this ugly situation. He thought of King Grizzly and his threats—thought of his own sworn pledge and of the terrible consequences which would follow its violation—and once again he cursed his mad covetousness.

He felt the grip tighten on his shoulder as Dave Long asked Donald McLean to make his meaning clearer. He caught himself wishing that partial paralysis might strike the nimble tongue of the ardent young miner, and so protract his explanation until that long half an hour might creep by and the hammer of the clock strike the seal from his lips. For right well he knew the stern temper of the man who had him in his charge. Only too well he knew that, if Dave Long thought he could expose the work of villains or criminals, especially toward Chispa Charley, he would pay no heed to the most solemn oaths of secrecy.

Rapidly as the tongue of the young miner ran in making his explanation, he consumed sufficient time for Windy to think of all this, and more. He recalled the merciless deeds which he had that night witnessed. He remembered how thoroughly in earnest King Grizzly had seemed when he uttered those threats as penalty for a broken pledge. He believed that the masked chief would surely know of such a violation, and just as certainly reward it with death.

On the contrary, stern as was Dave Long, he would not dare go quite that far, nor yet give a man over to the drunken mob should the cry of lynch law arise. A little hard usage, perhaps; but better that than death such as had, long ere this, overtaken Chispa Charley!

When Donald McLean finished his hasty account of the strange words and stranger hints which had awakened his fear for Chispa Charley, Dave Long turned to Windy Johnson, and in stern tones demanded what he meant. What did he know of Chispa Charley? Why had he made such rash bets—bets such as no sane man would make unless with the certain knowledge that death or some serious mishap had befallen the King of Sports?

"When the clock strikes one, I kin tell ye all,"

muttered the wretched creature, when he could delay his answer no longer. "Wait on'tel then—it won't be very long!"

"Long enough, maybe, to make all the difference between life and death for Chispa Charley!" sharply cried McLean.

"It won't matter to *him*, but it will to *me*—a heap! I 'peal to you, Dave Long! Putt yourself in my place fer jes' a minnit. Say you was made to look on at somethin' that you didn't want to see, but couldn't help it bein' done. Say you was told that at a certain minnit you might tell everythin', but that ef you opened your lips afore the clock struck one, death sure an' horrible would ketch you!"

The tight grip of the marshal cut his quavering speech short. And then Dave Long spoke sharply:

"Did this happen to *you*? Did *you* take that oath?"

"I *hed* to! They *made* me take it—made me sw'ar by all that's good an' bad to keep my tongue atween—"

"Until the clock struck one? Did they say *which* clock?"

"That 'dential clock!"

"And when it should strike one, you were free to tell all you knew?" demanded the marshal.

"Every word an' every act an' every sound," declared Windy Johnson, conveniently forgetting to mention that one particular reservation on the part of King Grizzly.

Dave Long wheeled him about so that he faced the door. At a gesture from him, Donald McLean stepped forward and clapped his hands over the trembling fellow's eyes, from behind.

"Stan' thar an' lis'en fer the clock to strike, Windy," said Dave Long, gravely. "The minnits is a-rollin' by mighty lively, jest now. Lis'en with all your ears!"

He turned and strode behind the bar, leaped upon the counter, opened the glass door which covered the dial, then turned the hand rapidly around until the hammer fell sharply on the hidden bell.

The clock in The Grave had struck one.

"Thar!" cried Dave, as he leaped to the floor.

"The clock hes struck one, an' that bu'sts the seal putt onto your lips. An' now you want to spit out the hull truth, jest as fast as the Old Boy'll let you wag your tongue! Whar is Chispa Charley, an' what hes happened to him?"

"You all 're witnesses that I didn't tell on'tel the clock struck one? You all kin take oath that ef they was any trick played, I didn't hev a hand in, nur yit see it done?" quavered Windy Johnson, still wholly wrapped up in his own welfare.

"You cur!" grated Donald McLean, savagely, his strong face white with rage and scorn as he spoke. "I can and do swear this much: if harm comes to Chispa Charley through your infernal foolery, I'll tear your white-livered heart out and thrust it down your own throat! Mark that, will you?"

Windy Johnson shrunk from that fiery outburst, and cried:

"Chispa was alive when I see'd him last an'—"

"Whar was he? In one word!" demanded Dave Long.

"On the black rock, in the river, at the falls!" spluttered Johnson, forced to the point.

A chorus of cries and oaths of wondering anger burst from the crowd, and only for the ready action of Dave Long, it would have gone hard with the man who made that startling revelation. The crowd surged forward, weapons were flashed in the lamplight, and fierce threats were showered over the trembling, cowering wretch who had gambled on the death of the King of Sports. But Dave Long covered the wretch, and forced the angry men of Canaan back, crying:

"Butcherin' him won't help to save Chispa! No lynchin' afore we find out jest what kind o' finger he hed in the pie! 'Stead o' that, git down to sober work. Git out hosses, some o' you, an' never mind stoppin' to hunt up the right owners. I'll be your bail ag'in' any damage. Git hosses an' ropes an' plenty o' stuff fer makin' up a bright blaze! *Git!* an' 'member it's fer Chispa Charley you're workin'!"

With wild cries, the crowd made a break for the door, scattering in mad haste to obey the orders given them. Only Dave Long, Gabriel Sexton, Donald McLean and the man behind the bar remained with Windy Johnson.

Honest Gabriel, stupefied by the unusual quantity of liquor he had swallowed in honor of his friend Chispa, vainly strove to comprehend what was going on. He tried to follow the crowd in their mad rush, but his legs gave out, and he fell in a quivering, grunting heap that was locked in a drunken slumber almost as soon as it touched the floor.

The bartender, as in duty bound, looked after the welfare of his employer, but none of the others gave him a second look or thought. Dave Long shook Windy Johnson by way of loosening his tongue, then pelted him with questions, cutting short all unnecessary speech, getting at the main facts with the least possible sacrifice of time. And Windy Johnson spoke with astonishing clearness and directness, for him. As

well he might. He began to see that he might be made to pay a dear price for his share in that black night's work, after all!

"You look to it that he don't give us the slip, Mac," the marshal hastily muttered, when he believed he had gained a sufficient knowledge for the time being.

"If he tries it, rope him neck and heels! He's got to go with us to the river."

"I'll do more than rope him, never you fear," was the merciless reply. "I'll make him wish he'd never been born!"

Dave Long did not wait to hear the reply of his deputy. He dashed out of the saloon, making his way to the nearest store, where a crowd had already gathered, smashing in the door before they could make the owner listen to their wants, or rather without taking the trouble to explain them.

Dave Long came none too soon, for the irate proprietor was just poking the muzzle of a repeating-rifle through the upper window when he paused, recognizing the voice of the marshal. A few hurried words reassured him, and he bade Dave enter and take what he wanted; that he would be with them as quickly as he could jump into his clothes.

Already the alarm had spread over the town, and the one wide street was fairly swarming with yelling, shouting, questioning men, women and children, all talking, no one listening.

A score of horses and mules were ready by the time Dave Long emerged from the store, well supplied with light, strong rope. He called for Donald McLean, who promptly answered, dragging Windy Johnson along after him by one arm.

"Mount that critter on a hoss an' climb up ahind him," hurriedly ordered the marshal, himself leaping into a saddle. "You boys with the ropes an' the torch-stuff, straddle critters an' keep up with us. The rest kin foller as they kin. We are boun' fer the falls, nigh the Lone Tree! Now, *GIT!*"

If not an elegant speech, it was one with the virtue of distinctness and easy comprehension.

Donald kept close beside the marshal as they dashed at breakneck speed out of Canaan, heading for the ford below the falls, the young miner keeping a death-grip on his prisoner, as Windy Johnson might well be called. After them poured the men of Canaan, all mounted who could stick on the confiscated animals, sometimes three astride one heavily-laboring beast. After them, again, came the footmen, running as though their own lives depended on the speed they maintained.

Never before had Canaan been so thoroughly aroused and on fire as in this instance!

After the first fierce burst was past, Dave Long drew as close to the animal ridden by Donald and Windy Johnson as prudence would permit, and plied the prisoner with questions tending to clear up the still misty case. And the gaunt speculator answered his inquisitor to the best of his ability, now and then venturing to slip in an adroit plea or excuse for his own benefit. And though there was still more than one point left in obscurity, before the ford was gained, Dave Long had a tolerably fair idea of what had happened and how.

"You kin see that I wasn't to blame," whined Windy Johnson, as their animals were obliged to go more moderately while fording the river. "They ketched me right here, an' they swore to bloody-murder me ef I didn't look on an' take notes fer to kerry to the men o' Canaan when the job was done. Then they made me sw'ar to never lisp a word on'tel the clock—"

"Drop it!" fiercely growled the marshal, as they emerged from the river. "Wait on'tel the work is over, an' then we'll see what's best to be did in your case."

"And if you know how, pray with all your vile heart that we may rescue Chispa Charley alive!" sternly added Donald. "If not—if your infernal dilly-dallying has resulted in his death—I'll strip your hide off by inches at a time, if I hang for it before you've got through groanin'!"

Windy Johnson seemed called upon to begin groaning right then and there! Surely a poor devil never tumbled into a worse streak of bad luck!

Right on over the rocky and rough trail they urged their panting horses, plying the spurs until the red blood flowed freely, feeling no mercy for the dumb brutes in their intense anxiety for the King of Sports.

"At last!" panted Dave Long, as he drew rein and leaped to the ground at a point between the Lone Tree and the falls.

"If we're only in time!" added Donald, also dismounting, one jerk of his muscular arm bringing Windy Johnson from the saddle.

Swift as were his movements, Dave Long was already at the edge of the canyon wall, peering down to see—nothing! The moon had passed along its course until its light no longer fell upon the center of the stream. Only a narrow strip directly below the wall on which the rescuers stood with bated breath was now illumined; and the contrast seemed to render the darkness beyond all the more intense.

"Chispa! Chispa Charley! Hal-l-o-o!" shouted Dave Long, making a trumpet of his hol-

lowed palms and leaning far over the escarpment in his eagerness to make himself heard.

They listened breathlessly until the echoes of that stentorian shout died away. Listened—but there came no reply!

"The odds is ag'in' it, but I *won't* believe he's dead!" the marshal muttered, his voice hoarse and strained as he drew back and glanced around him.

The other horsemen were coming up, one by one, according to the speed which they had been able to get from their mounts. Some among them bore cotton waste and oil, and Dave Long cried:

"Down an' start a fire big as a house! We can't tell how the luck runs on'tel they's some light on the subjick!"

CHAPTER X.

SPECULATORS IN HUMAN FLESH.

THE Mountain Lion pursued his course with a steady devotion to the business in hand that proved King Grizzly had made no mistake in selecting him for that portion of the peculiar night's work. At the same time he neglected no proper precautions, made no rash movement.

He kept several of his men some rods in advance of the captives, ready to attract and hold the attention of any stray wayfarer along the line of their retreat from the Teemer mansion. In case such were met, the animal-headed peradoes were to capture such if practically cover the flight of those having the prisoner especial charge, should the opposing force prove more than they could handle with ease and taint.

Not that there was much danger of this taking place; but such were the orders given by King Grizzly, and Mountain Lion held himself bound to carry all such out to the very letter.

The rapid motion through the night air had the effect of restoring Dinorah to consciousness, and for a few moments thereafter, her wilderment was really piteous.

She stared wildly about her, uttering a low gasping cry as she felt herself on horseback, moving rapidly on through the night. She stared from side to side with growing wonder that rapidly turned to fear. She struggled to release her waist from that strong, close embrace, at first mechanically, but then with frantic desperation as a glimmer of the black truth illumined her befogged brain.

"Charley—my Charley!" she gasped, as no reply returned and grew brighter. "Where are you? What have they—Merciful Father! I see—I know—they murdered you!"

A wild scream that was almost a wail burst from her pallid lips as she recalled that terrible scene—as she saw again the bound form of her betrothed go down before that brutal blow she heard once more the frightful, soul-sick laugh of the heavy revolver butt that seemed to sink deep into the skull of poor Chispa Charley.

She would have dashed herself to the ground only for the strong arms of Mountain Lion, whose skill and adroitness seemed in perfect keeping with his muscular powers. He swung her around to a position where he had more complete control over her, speaking rapidly in his voice firm but not harsh:

"Chispa Charley is alive and well, I tell you my sacred word of honor, Miss Dinorah. Calm yourself, I beg of you!"

If he flattered himself on the success of his speech the masked desperado was self-deceived. True, Dinorah made no further effort to escape his arms, just then. She hung a quivering, shuddering weight upon his arm, but it was because of her intense misery, of her utter hopelessness—because the sight of her falling, bleeding lover crushed her body and soul.

"Now that's more like it," said Mountain Lion, with an approving nod of his hidous cat-head. "You just listen to reason, and we'll get along famously together, I assure you."

"Which is a heap sight more than I kin do with this cussed critter!" angrily uttered the member of the Menagerie who had Fremont Metcalf in charge. "He's twistin'! 'Squarmin' wuss then the seven year cetch! I jes' lend him one 'longside the cabeza, 'um, to sorter ca'm him down a bit? Jes' one 'longside!"

"Not the ghost of one, Wolf!" quickly replied the Mountain Lion, as Black Wolf raised his heavy fist above the head of his charged. "It's not down in the articles of war as laid down by the chief. Maybe he don't ride easy?"

"Ef he *does*, durned ef I do!" grumbled Black Wolf, sullenly. "He went along like a lamb to the slaughter on'tel he hearn that woman critter begin to squawk, when—Durn an' double durn ye, lay *still!* Quit your squarmin' an' kickin', or boss or no boss, I'll lend ye a swat over the pate that'll put ye to sleep fer a month o' Sundays—ye hear?"

"Edge alongside, Wolf," said the keener-witted Mountain Lion, believing he understood the situation. "So! Now, Mr. Metcalf, one word with you. You are kicking up all this bobbery because of your sister? You want to say something, and act thus as a hint to us? If I'm right, nod your—"

"Needn't nod me clean out o' the saddle, durn ye!" growled Black Wolf, forgetting in his disgust that Fremont occupied that piece of horse-

furniture, while he was sitting on the horse's croup, instead.

"Brother—take me!" gasped Dinorah, only half-conscious what she was saying, as the moonlight fell squarely athwart the face of Fremont, now directly before her eyes. "They've killed him! They've murdered poor Charley!"

A brilliant idea struck the Mountain Lion, and he lost no time in acting upon it.

"Metcalf, will you pass your word of honor as a gentleman that you'll neither cry out nor attempt to run away, if I remove that gag, free your arms and permit you to take charge of your sister?"

Most vigorously did Fremont nod his head in assent.

"Don't decide without consideration," warned the Mountain Lion. "You will be watched closely, and if you attempt to play any tricks, you will suffer—and your sister will suffer with you."

Again Fremont nodded, vigorously.

"Take him up, Lion!" muttered the uneasy guard.

"I will. It can do no harm, that I can see, and all parties will get along with more ease and comfort."

As he spoke, Mountain Lion uttered a shrill, peculiar whistle that brought his men about him. A few hurried words informed them of the change which he had decided to make, adding that he took the entire responsibility on himself. If mischief sprung from the action, he would hold them blameless before King Grizzly.

Such being the case, of course there was no objections to be made, even by those who might otherwise have doubted the prudence of the move. Black Wolf cut the thongs that held the arms of Fremont Metcalf helpless, then removed the gag from between his aching jaws.

"Hope the gal'll make you as much trouble as you made me, bless ye fer a pig-headed bun'le o' squarm an' wiggle!" muttered Black Wolf as he slipped to the ground over the croup of the horse, to climb up behind the light-weight of the Menagerie.

Mountain Lion resigned his fair burden to Fremont, with a parting warning:

"Be careful how you abuse this privilege, my dear fellow! If you give me cause to regret my kindness of heart, you'll feel an earthquake in your immediate vicinity—sure!"

With a sobbing cry, Dinorah clasped Fremont about the neck, her aching head resting upon his bosom. She did not feel so utterly forsaken of heaven while she could feel his heart beating in sympathy with her sorrows.

He touched her white brow with his lips, and softly whispered such consolation as he could give his tongue to utter. And thus they resumed the night ride, Mountain Lion keeping close beside them, ready at any crooked movement to interfere, but with a certain shrewd kindness, keeping out of Dinorah's sight as much as practicable.

He saw that the tender whisperings of the father were gradually soothing her fright and grief, and he nodded approvingly as he congratulated himself on his wise forethought. The prisoners were both better content. They would both be in the rendezvous in much better condition, both bodily and mentally, and in just as much safety. Black Wolf was pleased. He himself was making the trip in much more comfort. And there was nothing to be feared from either of the prisoners attempting to either escape or reveal an outcry so long as their being together rested on their good behavior.

The route followed by the Menagerie was rough and intricate, with only now and then a few visible traces of a trail. Where it was the smoothest traveling, there were no indications of a road. All around them rose the rocky crags. At times they crept along some narrow shelf with a black abyss gaping at their feet, while a single misstep would hurl them down to utter annihilation. Again they wound through narrow gulches or defiles, the rock walls almost meeting above their heads, the stars and even the moon failing to cast any light on the flinty trail at that depth. Then they climbed up steep slopes with wind along the backbone of the ridge, twisting and turning until even Fremont finally lost all idea of their present whereabouts, though he kept his mind steadily fixed on that one purpose.

Mountain Lion watched his prisoners until he fancied the mind of Dinorah was sufficiently calmed to fitly receive his revelations. The cavalcade had reached a stretch of comparatively smooth ground, and so he could ride close alongside the doubly laden horse without crowding.

"I am glad to see the lady begin taking matters more philosophically," he said, his voice smooth and even polite. "She will not regret doing so, I assure you."

"Your conversation will not mend matters any," coldly rebuffed Fremont, with an angry glance at the hideous mask.

"There's right where you make a mistake, my dear fellow," laughed the Mountain Cat, with suave good humor. "If I were a betting man, I'd lay you any odds that in half an hour from now, the lady will be fairly her usual self

—and all through my conversation, as you call it."

Fremont made no reply, probably feeling how imprudent it would be to irritate the one who held them so utterly in his power. He bent his face lower over that of his sister, as though he would thus shut out the sound of that voice.

"I can assure both you and her, Metcalf, that Chispa Charley is not only still living, but that he is in not the least peril of his life."

Dinorah raised herself in her brother's arms, holding her trembling hands out toward the disguised outlaw, her voice quavering, full of mingled anguish and hope.

"Oh, if you can! If you can assure—but I saw him fall! I saw him fall before that cruel blow, dead—murdered!"

"Not so—not murdered—not even seriously injured," the Mountain Lion hastened to reply.

"How can you be sure of that, when you came away before the result could be made known?" demanded Fremont.

"By my intimate knowledge of the plans of the being whom I, with the rest of the Rocky Mountain Menagerie, am proud to acknowledge as King Grizzly. Because I know that too much depends on the life of Chispa Charley for the chief to permit its being prematurely cut short. Because, if Chispa Charley had unfortunately been slain by that blow, King Grizzly would have kept you, Fremont Metcalf, to perform the part originally assigned to the King of Sports."

"If I could only believe you!" murmured Dinorah, sinking back to her former position, growing faint and weak with her conflicting emotions.

"Why not?" was the quick retort. "What object could I have in deceiving you? I am not in love with you. I do not pretend to be either kind or tender-hearted. I am a man who cares only for Number One. So long as my schemes prosper, all the rest of the world may suffer and go to eternal smash, and I would not turn over a hand to save aught but my own from the wreck. And when I admit this—to which I stand ready to take oath, if it will gratify you in the least—what reason could I have for deceiving you? Not any!"

"If Chispa Charley was dead, I would tell you so, without trying to blunt the edge of my words. Your sufferings would not affect me in the least. I say once more: I am a man without any pretensions to a heart—so-called. I don't know what the words pity or sympathy or mercy mean. If I had a mother, and she stood in my path to any desired success, I could strike her down without the flinching of a nerve."

"Being this sort of animal, I say again to you that Chispa Charley still lives. He is in no immediate peril of death. He will live until King Grizzly has won his big game, through using him. After that—let come what will!"

Strange as it may appear, this coldly cynical speech gave both Fremont and Dinorah positive joy. They believed that he was telling them the truth—that their loved one still drew the breath of life! And in that thought they both lost, in a great measure, sight of their own precarious situation.

Mountain Lion saw this, and seemed satisfied thus far. He kept close to the side of their animal, and spoke easily:

"I'm afraid you hardly realize just what this Menagerie consists of, and for what purpose they were gathered together. It can do no harm to tell you in plain words: we are speculators in human flesh. We have gone to considerable trouble, pains and expense, but we count on making a handsome profit when the returns are all in."

"You, Miss Metcalf, are to be held for ransom. When the property which once belonged to Colonel Darius Teemer is converted into cash, it will amount to just enough to balance your liberty, with your brother thrown in as make-weight."

"With that end in view, King Grizzly brought his Menagerie to visit you. For that purpose I am now conducting you to a snug and retired retreat, where you can be kept in comfort while the negotiations are being completed."

"You have made Chispa Charley your business manager, and he it is who has conducted the trade with the company on East thus far. For that reason King Grizzly took him one way while you two were given over to my care. If Chispa is prompt in coming to terms, your imprisonment will be brief. If not—if he holds gold more precious than your freedom, than your lives—well, it will be slightly awkward for all parties, I'm thinking! Certainly for him, and almost certainly for you two."

"If you are wise, you will study the matter over, after we reach our present destination, and make up your minds to join together in writing a letter of instruction to Chispa, reminding him that delays are dangerous, particularly just now. Perhaps he will listen to you with more respect than to King Grizzly. If not—well, we'll not cross the river until we come to it!"

He continued speaking in this strain for some minutes longer, but there is no particular neces-

sity for reproducing his words. Enough has been said to give a fair idea of the drift of his arguments.

If somewhat prosy, his talk had one good effect. It convinced Dinorah—if not her brother—that her lover was still living and in no immediate danger of death. It convinced her that if their recently won fortune was freely sacrificed, they might yet be happy in freedom with each other.

For some time longer the night ride lasted, but when the moon told the passing of midnight, the little cavalcade came to an abrupt halt, and Mountain Lion spoke quickly:

"We are nearly at our journey's end, my dear friends, and according to the rules and regulations which govern this model Menagerie, you must submit to having your eyes blindfolded until the rest of the trip is completed. You shall suffer no harm, no indignities, if you submit quietly. If you prefer to be obstinate and unruly, the result will be the same, though perhaps not quite so agreeable."

With his own hands he securely muffled up both of their heads, then took Dinorah once more in his arms, Black Wolf shifting Fremont into the saddle and then leaping up behind him as at first.

This arranged, the party once more proceeded, turning and twisting, making sharp turns to the right and then the left, as though on purpose to confuse their captives. And deprived of sight as they were, this was no serious task. Soon they were completely lost as to which direction they were pursuing.

Half an hour later, the party drew rein at the foot of a high, perpendicular wall of rock which, in the semi-obscurity, seemed to reach half-way up to the twinkling stars. Mountain Lion handed Dinorah to one of his men, then uttered a shrill whistle, bending his neck until he could look far up the rock wall. Only for a few moments. Then a bright red light became visible for a brief space, vanishing as though into the rocks.

Mountain Lion resumed possession of Dinorah, saying:

"Have no fears, Miss Metcalf. You represent too much gold for us to put your life into danger. A little patience, and the end will be reached."

Through the darkness there slowly descended a rude sort of basket, made of skins and hung to the ends of three strong ropes which joined into one not very far above the sling. Into this rude structure Mountain Lion stepped, holding Dinorah on one arm, while he steadied himself with the other, grasping the ropes where they were knotted together. He gave this a shake, then the sling began to slowly mount into the air.

From overhead came a faint, squeaking sound that told plainly enough the nature of the machinery by which this result was accomplished. And as they ascended, a rift in the white rock wall became visible, growing more and more distinct until it shaped itself into a narrow ledge, flat and level, running vertically across the face of the cliff.

Mountain Lion stepped from the sling to the ledge, then paused as the two men at the rude windlass began to lower the rope once more.

From the windlass reached a stout piece of timber, projecting a couple of feet over the ledge, and at the same time rising until its extremity was about as high as a man's head. At this extremity was fastened a wheel of iron, with a deeply grooved rim. Through this groove the rope ran as the wheel turned in obedience to the working of the windlass.

A few moments later Black Wolf came up bringing Fremont Metcalf with him, and then, without waiting for the rest of the party, Mountain Lion faced the rock wall, passing through a narrow slit in the side of the mountain, which was ordinarily hidden from casual observation by a close-fitting screen of painted and sanded canvas.

Taking a few steps inside, Mountain Lion made an abrupt turn to the left, coming into a dim light shed by a lantern. At his signal, Black Wolf, leading the blindfolded man, took up this lantern and led the way more rapidly.

As they advanced, the roof of the curious cavern lifted and the space on either hand grew wider until it spread out into a spacious apartment. Straight across this Black Wolf led the way, followed in silence by Mountain Lion with his captive resting over one shoulder. Through a second narrow passage, through another swelling of the cave, and then with a sharp turn, they seemed to reach the end of their journey.

"Hang up the light, Wolf, and cast off the covering. Let our guests have the use of their eyes. And, if you like, you can return and spell the men at work."

Black Wolf quickly obeyed, removing the muffer from the head of his charge, then gliding silently away. Mountain Lion also freed Dinorah, bowing with mock ceremony as he waved his hand before him, to call their attention to the surroundings.

"Make yourselves quite at home, dear sir and lady. There is food and water. Yonder are blankets, if you feel inclined to woo the drowsy god. You can keep each other company, as

long as you do not try to escape. Any such attempt will not only be dangerous and useless, but it will result in your separation and close confinement. Good-night to you both!"

Without awaiting a reply, he turned on his heel and hastened away, leaving the dimly burning lantern with them.

Without taking even a glance at her surroundings, Dinorah flung herself into the strong arms of her brother, sobbing bitterly, giving way to her highly wrought-up feelings in a flood of burning tears.

Tenderly he sought to soothe her, but overtasked nature would not be denied its revenge. He bore the poor girl to the rude pallet indicated by their captor, sinking down and holding her in his arms, as tenderly, as soothingly as though she had been nothing more than a sorely grieved child.

She murmured her grief and fears through her tears. She had thoughts only for Chispa Charley. She seemed to forget the assurance given by the Mountain Lion. She felt that if not already slain, the fate of her betrothed was quite as surely sealed. Hope had utterly deserted her.

Tenderly and with no little tact, Fremont endeavored to calm her grief, softly whispering words of hope and comfort in her ear as he held her close to his bosom. And his efforts were in the end rewarded with a certain degree of success.

It is no easy task to kill hope in one young and full of healthy life. And Dinorah ceased to weep so bitterly, though her voice was still broken and sobs came plentifully.

"It is a just punishment for our covetous love of gold!" she declared, with sudden force. "Oh! if we had never come to this horrible country! If we had never—no, not that! For then Charley—" she suddenly checked herself.

"And our father, Dinorah?" uttered Fremont.

A soft sigh drew their eyes toward a dimly outlined figure standing near them. Fremont uttered a cry of anger as he recognized the haggard features of the man called Dick Morley.

"What! you, you scoundrel!" he cried, leaping to his feet with clinched hands, his eyes all aglow. "You—and here?"

"Yes, it is me—your father—your wretched parent!" was the husky response, as the man bowed his head humbly.

CHAPTER XI.

WAS IT TRUTH, OR ONLY ACTING?

HUMBLE in action, humble in tone, the man stood before the astonished brother and sister with meekly bowed head, like one afraid or ashamed to lift his eyes to encounter theirs.

Yet the term astonished scarcely does justice to the feelings with which they regarded this man. They felt a peculiar, complicated mixture of emotions; of wonder, of scorn, of indignation, of angry doubt and suspicion, all mingled together.

Their minds reverted to the recent past, when this man played an important, if brief, part in the tragedy which stirred Canaan and Tinker's Dam from center to circumference.

It was of this man that Colonel Darius Teemer spoke when he gazed upon the painted likeness of the long-missing Tucker Metcalf, declaring that the original of that painting was still in the land of the living. It was of this man whom Donald McLean spoke when he pronounced the name of Dick Morley.

This was he who afterward sought out Dinorah Metcalf and claimed her as his child; who declared that his rightful name was Tucker Metcalf; who told a long and pitiful story of desperate battling with adverse fortune, of repeated defeats that invariably came when his hopes were highest, forcing him to begin the killing struggle anew, placing the hoped and prayed for goal even more distant than it had been at the outset. He spoke of having at last won a fortune, only to be robbed of it and almost of life at one and the same blow. He spoke of a terrible blank in his life—of long months and years concerning which he could give no satisfactory account. He told Dinorah all this, then he took his departure, without making any positive claims on her love or duty. And his manner was such that had he come to her alone with all those circumstantial proofs of his identity with the long missing miner, Tucker Metcalf, Dinorah had, more than once since then, half-admitted that she might have believed in his truth. But the company he kept with her bitterest, merciless enemies, armed her against his melancholy speech, prejudiced her mind and heart against his claims even before they were made.

Then, when Colonel Darius Teemer went down to death amid the ruins of the pyramid of crime which his own hands had raised, Dick Morley vanished without leaving a clew behind him by which his wild, romantic story could be tested or his trail followed by those who wished for a more decisive interview.

This precipitous flight was in itself a plain proof of guilt, as Fremont argued with Dinorah on those rare occasions when she expressed a doubt as to the correctness of her first impressions. And gradually the matter had been

dropped, buried in the grave which now held the skeleton discovered in that deserted shaft.

All this flashed through the minds of brother and sister in the few moments following the startling claim of the man who had stolen upon them like a ghost, or a velvet-footed thief in the night. And so rapidly does the human brain work under certain conditions, that the grave, mournful voice had hardly died away before Fremont Metcalf hotly replied:

"Our father? You? Bah! Our father was a man of truth and honor, not a lying impostor, drunkard, thief and renegade!"

"You will regret those harsh words when—"

"Not half so much as you will regret having placed your lying lips within reach of my fist, if you don't levitate in a hurry," roughly interposed Fremont, striving to remove the hands which Dinorah clasped around his right arm.

In silence the dark figure unfolded its arms, then stepped lightly forward, stooping for an instant almost at the feet of the enraged young man. As he rose erect, his hands behind him, his haggard face within easy striking distance, he seemed to invite a blow from those nervous fists. And his voice was low, gloomy, hopeless.

"Strike—the harder the better! Your hands could give no sharper pain than your tongue has already inflicted. Or, if you fear to soil your clean hands, use the tools I lay at your feet. They can do the work, swift and surely!"

Fremont uttered a low ejaculation of surprise as he saw why the strange being had stooped at his feet. There, in the full light of the lantern, lay a brace of serviceable revolvers, and a long-bladed sheath-knife!

What did it all mean? Was this but the bait to a cunning trap into which he was expected to rush? But even as this suspicion flashed across his brain, he stooped and grasped the weapons, a single glance showing him that the chambers of each pistol were supplied with cartridges.

Fearing the worst, knowing his hot and impetuous temper, Dinorah clung still more closely to him, hurriedly panting:

"Brother, be prudent! Don't strike—shed no blood—he knows not what he says! Poor fellow! he's crazed!"

"Not now, child," quickly uttered the intruder, something like a smile lighting up his deeply-lined countenance. "I have been crazed. My brain was still in a fog when I last saw you, at the Occidental Hotel in Canaan. I told you a story then that had been drilled into my poor brain until I knew it as a school-boy knows his alphabet. And yet, all the time I knew that among the lies were bits of truth, taken from my own forgotten past! I knew this, yet I was unable to separate the real from the false, even when I had gone away from your presence and there was nothing to disturb my aching brain—nothing but those faint, shadowy, ghost-like phantoms of the past."

He ceased speaking, passing one thin, brown hand across his brow, as though the mists were gathering again. Dinorah gazed intently at him, her heart still beating wildly, those buried doubts beginning to lift their heads from the grave.

Fremont, after hastily assuring himself that the pistols were in good working order, and that the knife was a substantial reality, gave a short, impatient laugh of incredulity.

"All of which is, no doubt, interesting to yourself, but I assure you that it fails to convince us that we are your children. Of course you are not crazy—no rascal ever is until the rope of the hangman dangles in his face!"

"Stop!" and Dick Morley—to make use of the name by which he was best known—raised one hand commandingly, his form drawing erect, his dark eyes flashing with a stern dignity that for the moment rendered his deeply marked countenance fairly handsome and noble. "You are bitterly insulting one whom your lips should honor, even if your heart fails to admit his claims upon its affection. Once more I tell you, I am Tucker Metcalf, your father!"

"And I as plainly denounce you as a vile impostor!"

"Fremont—brother!" murmured Dinorah. "Hear him out, if only for my sake! Something whispers in my heart that—"

"I know—the old, foolish dreams!" almost roughly interrupted the young man. "I thought they were buried forever in the grave that holds the bones of our father!"

"Not of your father, but of your father's assassin!" Dick Morley quickly inserted.

Fremont laughed as he took advantage of the seeming slip.

"His assassin? I thought you claimed to be Tucker Metcalf? Yet you look amazingly healthy for an assassinated man? Pray how will you set about explaining that contradiction?"

"Will you give me an opportunity of doing so?" earnestly asked Morley, an eager light in his eyes, his hands tightly clasping then unclasping before him as he awaited a reply.

Fremont hesitated, glancing at his sister. For himself he had not the slightest doubt but what this was the rankest of all impostors. He felt positive that the long missing Tucker Metcalf was dead, his bones buried on the little hill back

of Canaan. He knew that naught this man might say could shake his own belief, but how would it be with Dinorah?

"Let him speak, dear brother!" whispered Dinorah, her lips so close to his ear that the other man could not possibly catch a syllable. "If he is the impostor you think, you can catch him tripping, and strip off the mask."

Still he hesitated. Something told him there was a cunning and dangerous trap hidden beneath this strange appearance and stranger request. Yet he could not form even the faintest suspicion of what that trap could be.

"If I was an enemy, would I furnish you with weapons with which you can take my life, the moment you detected me in a move contrary to your interests?" hurriedly uttered Morley. "If an enemy, would I place my life still more completely in your hands, as I am about to do—as I do, by declaring that I wrote the warning which you found in your coat-pocket last evening?"

"You—you wrote that note?"

"Hush!" with a gesture of warning. "Let those demons with wild beast faces gain but the faintest suspicion of the truth, and they would tear me limb from limb before your very eyes! Caution, unless you would have murder on your souls!"

Amazed, bewildered, not knowing what to say or think, Fremont sunk back on the rude pallet, staring at the pale, deep-lined face of the man who made that startling assertion.

Morley turned quickly away, passing from the lighted chamber into the dark passage, but ere the brother and sister had recovered from the amazement into which his unexpected avowal threw them, he returned, hastily explaining:

"I fancied I heard the sounds of some one in the passage where I was placed on guard, but I was mistaken. Those demons in human form believe me one of them, heart and body. They trust me as one of the most faithful, but were they to gain a suspicion of the truth, no earthly power could save me from their vengeance! They would kill me like a dog!"

"So you say," slowly uttered Fremont, still skeptical, despite this seeming proof of friendship. "But what proof have we that you are speaking truly?"

"Have I not given you ample proof? Have I not placed my very life in your power?"

"If what you say about the note of warning is true, yes; at least, it would seem so. But that note was given too late to do any good. It had scarcely been read ere the blow it spoke of fell upon us."

"They kept me in the dark as to the hour of striking. I had every reason to believe you would have ample time to prepare for the worst," muttered Morley.

"Yet you claim to be one of the most trusted members of the band!" half-sneered Fremont. "Your story does not hang together as well as it might!"

"Even yet you doubt me?"

"Why not? You have served under a most cunning and audacious plotter, by your own admission. You consented to tell the story Teemer put in your mouth, the more surely to get my sister into his power, when, believing as he did that my destruction was inevitable, he would have nothing more to fear for his ill-gotten wealth when he had forced her to marry his hopeful son; or, in case she still refused, to kill her. The eldest villain was killed, but his son lived, and seems to have the same shining mark in view. You are serving under that son, as you admit. He is our bitterest enemy. Then, I ask once more, why should we regard you as other than an enemy?"

"Because I have already acted as no enemy would dare act in giving you arms to defend yourselves, to hold the villains at bay until you can make proper terms with them."

"Which may all be but a part of some cunning plot to—"

With a passionate gesture, Morley checked his speech. His own words came swiftly, almost angrily, yet with a cadence in them that told of sorrow and injured feelings.

"Will naught I say convince you, stubborn boy? Then put it to the last test! Call aloud for your captors to come here. Shout, and they will answer. And when they do come, show them the weapons you now possess. Tell them how you came by them. Add that I swore to you my hand wrote and delivered that note of warning. Tell them this, and then see how long I would be permitted to live! Dying, you might believe me, perhaps!"

He drew his tall form erect, his arms folded across his chest. In the dim light afforded by the dingy lantern, he looked far more like a martyr anticipating death than a treacherous plotter. And as he gazed keenly into his haggard face, Fremont Metcalf felt a strange, indefinable thrill creeping over him. What if it were true—what if this was indeed the long-lost—Bah! impossible! Tucker Metcalf was dead and his remains buried.

And yet, if not what he pretended, this man was a superb actor, playing some deep and subtle game—for what end? As often as he asked himself that question, Fremont felt himself still

more utterly in the dark. It was a perplexing enigma!

For a brief space the tall man stood thus, as though waiting for Fremont Metcalf to utter the alarm that would forever set at rest his doubts, one way or the other. Then, with more of passion and eagerness than he had thus far betrayed, Dick Morley stepped a pace nearer Dinorah, holding out his hands toward her, his voice low and broken, trembling and husky.

"To you, dear child, I appeal for a hearing. Even if you are as skeptical as your brother, it will not harm you to give an ear to the sad story of a broken-down wretch. You may not believe, but you will not revile and jeer at the poor devil whose wits are still wrapped in a fog. You will judge me with charity, even if you condemn my poor flickering light to utter extinction. Say that you will listen to my story!"

Dinorah turned to Fremont, whose brow was contracted, his eyes glittering angrily, his old suspicions more than revived by that speech. To him it sounded hollow and hypocritical; to Dinorah, it was more like a prayer coming from the grave.

"It can do no harm to listen, brother, dear," she murmured, with a caressing touch of her soft hand. "If he is false, he cannot deceive us. And if it *should* be true as he says!"

"It is all a vile lie, from beginning to end!" was the angry response. "He told the story once, and was proved a fraud of the very first water. Our father died long years ago—you know that as well as I. You saw the ring, you read the papers, you wept over his poor bones and—"

"The ring and the papers he stole from me! The bones of the man who murdered me—of the assassin, not the father!" impulsively interposed Dick Morley.

"Assassinated, yet living, able to talk, to conceive such a monstrous design as to place yourself in the shoes of a man who died years and years ago? Miracles never cease!" sneered Fremont, his strange prejudice against this man growing more intense with the passage of each minute he stood there.

"Alive in body, yes," slowly commented Dick Morley, his excitement vanishing to give place to a subdued sadness that made Dinorah gasp and catch her breath to restrain the impulse she felt to arise and fall upon his bosom. "But there are worse murders than shutting off the breath that keeps the empty shell in motion and from decay. There are strokes that can kill the mind and annihilate the memory of the past, even while leaving him who once had both, to wander through the cold and cruel world, in outward seeming the same as other men; and this is why I say that I was assassinated—murdered by the devil whose bones you discovered in that deserted shaft and buried, weeping and mourning over them as the relics of a good and true man, as the remains of your long-lost father! Yet you scorn me—you jeer at and call me vile names when I try to open your eyes to the truth! And men say Heaven is just!"

Once again Fremont Metcalf felt that peculiar thrill, and this time he could not drive it away so readily as before. He even caught himself wondering what if this strange story should prove true? What if he had revered the bones of the man who had worse than slain the real Tucker Metcalf? What if this strangely-brought-about interview was indeed the last opportunity he would ever have of solving the mystery which for long years had enshrouded the fate of the lost miner?

And almost before he realized the fact, he was saying:

"Tell your story, if you will not be content without. We will listen to it with all the attention it deserves."

CHAPTER XII.

DOUBLY UNFORTUNATE OR THRICE ACCURSED.

WITH a low, half-stifled sound which would be difficult to define accurately, Dick Morley started forward, his hands impulsively extended as though to grasp those of brother and sister. Dinorah would have met him half-way, but Fremont secured her hand instead; and the strange man withdrew his, bowing his head humbly as he stepped back, saying gently:

"I was wrong. Forgive me. It is so hard to remember, when one's mind has been but an empty blank for so many years!"

"We have agreed to listen to your story," said Fremont, coldly. "Let that be sufficient for the time being."

"Hard—hard as adamant!" muttered the man, his head bowing a little, his voice low and husky, more as though giving unconscious utterance to his thoughts than pronouncing them for the benefit of others. "Will nothing soften his heart?"

"The truth; suppose you try that?" sneered Fremont.

"I will! And I call on high Heaven to bear witness—to strike me dumb forever if I knowingly utter one syllable that is false!" cried Dick Morley with a fire and energy such as he had not before displayed.

Indeed his voice was raised to a perilous pitch,

if indeed he was acting contrary to the interests of the Menagerie. And he seemed to realize this almost before the echoes of his voice died away. He lifted one hand with a sign of silence, then turned and glided silently from the rock chamber into the dark passage which led to the main portion of the cavern.

He was gone for some minutes, and Dinorah began to fear, while Fremont hoped, that he had been driven from his purpose by the strong skepticism and undisguised scorn of the youth. But both were disappointed, one disagreeably, the other quite pleasantly, when Dick Morley once more returned to the little chamber, his deep-lined countenance expressing relief.

"The rascals are all sound asleep, save those on guard duty at the mouth of the cave," he hurriedly muttered, once more standing erect before the brother and sister, who sat side by side on the pallet, the lantern shining clearly upon their faces, leaving that of the strange man in the shadow. "I feared some of the devils might have caught the sounds of my voice, and with their curiosity once awakened, your kind boon would avail me nothing."

"Nor will it under the circumstances, unless you cut it short and come to the point as quick as your wonderfully balanced brain will permit," a little sourly uttered Fremont.

Dick Morley bowed his head in silence, looking more like a meek penitent than a member of an outlaw band in the presence of two captives whose lives might almost be said to depend on his will.

"It is a long story, even with the frightful blank which makes many years seem to my poor brain more like some horrible nightmare dream than aught of reality!" muttered Morley, passing a thin brown hand across his wrinkled brow, as though striving to wipe away the confusing mists which still hung before his memory.

"Then, in mercy to us all, skip the uncertain part, and get down to flat business at once. Tell us how much you expect to be paid by Walter Keever, or Walter Teemer, as he may prefer being called, for this bit of work," said Fremont, hardly.

Dick Morley drew his tall figure erect, all signs of dubiety vanishing as though by magic. His voice, though low and guarded, was still firm and even haughty.

"I hold you to your promise. If you are the true son of a once true father, you will not require another reminder. I will not detain you longer than I can help, but I must be permitted to tell my story after my own fashion."

"Which is one of a cut not difficult to delineate or describe; but go on. The best of us have petty sins which must meet with punishment here below, I suppose, though why *you* should be chosen as the instrument to—"

"Brother, you are too harsh!" murmured Dinorah, one of her white hands touching him on the lips and cutting short his mocking speech. "We promised to listen to whatever he might have to say, and even if we knew positively that he intended to deceive us, that pledge should bind us to hearken with at least an outward show of respect. I believe that he is perfectly sincere—that he feels his claims are founded on justice and fact!"

"Heaven bless you for those words dear child!" the man uttered, his voice unsteady for the moment. "But do not chide him; he is right, from his point of belief. I have faith that he will come over to your side, when he has listened to the sad, bleak story I have to tell."

"Small hopes of that, if I die of old age before you have turned the first corner in that marvelous tale!" Fremont added, with a short, contemptuous laugh.

Yet he was far from feeling the complete assurance which he outwardly assumed. Despite the almost certainty that Tucker Metcalf was dead and buried; despite the fact that everything went to indicate this strange man as an impostor of the rankest, most unblushing sort, it was only by a constant struggle against some subtle sympathy that he could maintain that air of ridicule and scorn. He felt that he was wronging both himself and the one against whom his shafts—some of them more brutal than keen-edged—were directed. He felt a burning curiosity to hear the story which this strange claimant could tell, even while delaying that narration by his jeers, his taunts, his sarcasm. It was a curious affair, taken all in all, nor was this double struggle of Fremont Metcalf's the least remarkable portion.

Dick Morley paid no attention to that last remark. He folded his arms over his breast, standing before the brother and sister with downcast eyes, his voice at first sounding dull and monotonous.

"When Colonel Darius Teemer came to me and told me that he had made an important discovery that involved my past life, I was only too ready to listen to him. Many a long and weary night had I lain awake, trying, trying, oh! so hard! to pierce the black clouds that covered the past over as with a funeral pall—but all in vain. If I had ever had a past, it was gone forever from my life, as I grew to fear, years before."

"I had heard much of Colonel Teemer. He was a rich and a great man. People called him the soul of honor. So far as I could say, their opinion was founded on fact. And so I went with him, willingly enough, listening with eagerness beyond the power of speech to describe, while he told me the story I was afterward to tell you, child."

"Even while he spoke, it seemed to me that I could catch glimpses of light through the mists. It seemed to me, when he came to certain points in that story of trial and disappointment, that I could remember them as they happened to me! And when I went over the story by myself, I found the scars which might have been made just as he told me, that black night in Denver! And if I doubted before, I did so no longer."

"He told me that my name was Tucker Metcalf. That I had once been a rich man in the East, but losing my wealth through business reverses, I was too proud to labor where I had led, and bidding adieu to my wife and child, I turned my face to the West, and joined in the mad rush to Pike's Peak."

"He told me that I vowed to never return to my family until I carried with me a fortune to replace the one I had lost. He told me of how I labored in the mines, now with fickle fortune smiling upon my hopes, only to frown before the longed-for goal was reached. He said that for year after year I toiled on after this fashion, while my family—increased by one since my departure—waited and longed for my home-coming. He told me all this, and I believed him. Why not?"

"Like one in a dream, I fancied I could remember it all, as the words passed his lips. I remembered how I hoped and how I despaired; and I remembered, too, something of how fortune at length came my way, and I gathered up gold enough to keep the wolf from the door, though I should live until old age."

"I could even remember something of the time when that fortune was lost, though here it was even less plain than at other points. I knew that I was hurt—that I lay fighting death for a long time; but until Colonel Teemer told me it all happened in Denver, that I gambled while drunk, and was badly wounded by the dealer when I accused him of foul play. I never knew just how it all came about. Even now I am uncertain. He may have been lying to me through all that portion of the story; I cannot say for certain."

"But this I do know. When I paid you that visit, child, I firmly believed every word I breathed to you was plain and simple truth! I felt that I was your father. I felt that in the long ago my name had been Tucker Metcalf. But at the same time I felt that I had somehow deeply wronged you. I felt that until you gave me your full and free forgiveness, I must not even touch your hand, or beg your love."

"Then came the discovery of the crimes which Colonel Teemer had committed. It was a terrible shock to me, for I began to fear that he had lied to me, only seeking to make use of me, through my darkened and misty past, as a tool. And when Donald McLean came to me and whispered for me to flee for my life—that the citizens of Canaan were already looking for me to lynch me—I took his advice. I fled to the mountains, my mind once more a frightful blank!"

"The next I remember is hearing of the discovery which you, Fremont Metcalf, made in that deserted shaft. It was a story that spread with the rapidity of wild-fire, for it was both romantic and sensational, just such food for thought and discussion as delights the hard-working digger when his day's toil is ended, and he enjoys his pipe before sleeping."

"I heard of the discovery in a mountain cabin where I had wandered, the good Lord only knows how or why! I heard of the ring which was recognized by you, and of the papers found on the skeleton. But when they said that this proved the grim relics to be those of the long-lost Tucker Metcalf, I knew that they spoke falsely, through ignorance of the truth."

"It came to me like a revelation from on high, and when the first mad whirl of wonder and delight calmed down, I was far on my way to Canaan, to expose the mistake and assert my own identity. I forced myself to sit down and calmly go over the facts of the strange case, as I believed them. And then, to my horror, I found that my brain was slowly, surely going back to that old, horrible foggiest!"

"I fought desperately against it. I wrote down such points as I was the most certain of, lest they too should slip my memory. And then—what happened, I know not to this day!"

"I can only say that when I next remember, I was here in this den of evil ones. And at their head I recognized Walter Teemer, the son of Colonel Darius Teemer."

"Still, I had cunning enough to conceal my wonder and my horror. I listened and took notes until I gained a partial knowledge of the truth, then I ventured to talk, learning still more, but without awakening any suspicions on their part."

"I found out that Walter Teemer had, in connection with his father and the gang of

roughs who followed Romeo Bugg as a chief, been long connected with a band of road-agents and mail-robbers. This was their rendezvous, as yet undiscovered by the agents of the law, though Chispa Charley, through his cunning disguise as Old Forked-Lightning, had captured a number of the league and caused their imprisonment.

"I learned, too, that Teemer was playing for a still bigger stake, and when I discovered at whom his blows were to be leveled, I resolved to foil him if it lay in my power.

"You know that I made the attempt. It was no fault of mine that it failed to save you. I durst not ask too many questions, lest my purpose should be suspected. I could not remember having heard any date set for dealing the first blow at you and your riches. I could only hope that my warning would reach you in time.

"I gained permission to leave the cavern, and when at a safe distance from it and my unchosen comrades, I wrote that note. I disguised my face as well as I could, and stole unobserved into the Better Yet. I waited until you came down into the workings, and then contrived to slip the note into your pocket, without your suspecting anything. It was all I durst do, for I knew that, were you to discover me, you would distrust my motive, even if you didn't set the miners on me.

"I managed to leave the mine as I came, without being discovered or suspected. I returned to this place, for fear my absence would be injurious to you. And then, when King Grizzly, as Walter Teemer is known here, selected me as one of the men to remain on guard at the cavern, what could I do? He said nothing about his object, gave no hint as to his destination, but I feared the worst. Still, as I said, what could I do? With me were left three trusted men, any one of whom was more than my physical match. I could not escape from the cavern without their discovering my purpose, since they were all to remain on guard at the entrance. To make such an effort, would not only make them suspect me, but deprive me of all hopes of aiding you, should the devilish plans of King Grizzly succeed."

He paused as though for breath, and Fremont said:

"All of which may be true, as it sounds quite plausible. But it is not very convincing proof of your being our father. And that, I believe, is what you set out to prove."

Dick Morley bowed meekly, his voice quite as humble:

"It is the fault of my poor brain. It is hard to keep it steadily in one course. I beg your pardon if I weary you."

"Nay, it is brother who should beg pardon!" cried Dinorah with sudden energy. "Even if you are deceived in your belief—as I fear you must be!—we owe you much for your brave deed in warning us of the danger impending over us!"

"Even though it came too late to foil the cunning plans of his master!" sneered Fremont.

"Never mind, good child," said Morley, checking Dinorah as she seemed about to renew her rebuke. "I am used to being wronged, and one more cut will not hurt me much. Leave time to set me right in his eyes, and let me finish. It is growing late, and some of the men may awaken and come this way.

"To you, Fremont Metcalf, I will answer: I still believe, as high Heaven hears me! that I am your father. I know in my heart that the skeleton of the man whom you discovered in that deserted shaft, is that of one who stole my ring, my papers, who nearly killed my body even as he ruined my mind, only to fall a victim to an avenging Providence! If you ask me how I know all this, I will have to confess that I cannot explain it clearly enough to satisfy a doubter like you."

"Nor why Colonel Teemer selected you to play the part of Tucker Metcalf, when at one time, if your claim is founded on fact, he must have known you were the original—must have had intimate dealings with you as Tucker Metcalf—since on that skeleton were found the title deeds of the Better Yet, with a receipt for full payment, signed by his own hand and dated less than five years ago! Would he bring forward the rightful owner of all this property, to help him defraud the children of Tucker Metcalf—his own tool, if your claim is to be believed? Can you explain this puzzling fact?"

Dick Morley slowly shook his head, muttering:

"I know it is a terribly perplexing mystery, but still I repeat my assertion. I am Tucker Metcalf. I cannot explain how I know it, but I do!"

"Perhaps I can give a satisfactory explanation," said the young man, rising to his feet, his voice clear and steady.

"If you can, I will bless you forever!" impulsively cried the old man, both hands extended, his eyes all aglow.

With a short, hard laugh, Fremont Metcalf struck the trembling hands down as they tried to clasp his, then said:

"Because you fancy you can gain a fortune by lying, by rank perjury and hypocritical act-

ing! Off with you, you pitiful scoundrel! Be off, or I'll call your fellows and tell them how you have tried to defraud them! Go, while you may!"

CHAPTER XIII.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH!

"TEN to one it's all a waste o' time an' powder!"

Mechanically the words dropped from the lips of Windy Johnson as he stood cowering near the edge of the canyon, peering blindly out into the gloom. He was scarce conscious of his ominous prediction, but low though it was, the keen ears of Dave Long caught the speech, and forgetting his office, forgetting the age, the half-cracked brain of the gaunt speaker, he whirled around and caught the trembling wretch with a grip that threatened to crush his dry bones like frozen twigs.

"You croakin' sneak!" he grated, his voice hardly recognizable, his smothered grief, rage and longing for revenge bursting forth with uncontrollable fury. "Ef Chispa's gone, go you an' tell him we're lookin' fer him! Go, cuss ye!"

With a mighty effort he raised the shivering, screaming wretch clear of the ground, above his head, turning and taking a step nearer to the edge of the canyon wall, his muscles of steel straining to their utmost tension as he seemed about to hurl the poor devil far out into the raging torrent!

And without an effort to save the despairing wretch, Donald McLean cried tauntingly:

"Ten to one it's all a waste o' time an' powder! But all the same, give him a good send-off, Dave, my lad!"

Though the speaker had no such intention, those words doubtless preserved the life of Windy Johnson for the time being. They seemed to recall Dave Long to his natural senses, and instead of hurling his captive far out into the darkness, he turned again and dropped him on the ground, panting, trembling like one whose strength has suddenly been taken from him. And touching Windy Johnson with a foot, he muttered:

"Go hide yourself, man! Keep out o' my sight fer now, ef you ain't in love with death! An' 'bove all, don't croak like that 'bout a man whose dirty socks 'd be too good fer your Thanks-givin' dinner!"

Windy Johnson lay quivering where he was dropped, too utterly unmanned to arise and flee, even though he heard the ominous threats and saw the black looks of the men of Canaan as they gathered around, for the moment forgetting their work in the exciting episode. He knew that, somehow, they placed the worst blame of this sad affair on his shoulders, and he knew that his life would not be worth an hour's purchase in case the worst had happened to Chispa Charley. But so utterly unmanned was he that he could only lie there and shiver and gasp and groan.

As though fearing to trust himself, Dave Long turned so that the ragged heap of wretched humanity was hidden from his view, then shouted once more over the dark waters:

"Chispa Charley! Keep up, good boy! They's help a-comin', and it's old Davy that tells ye!"

He drew the revolvers from his belt, and with one in each hand, the muzzles pointing upward, he worked the self-cockers as rapidly as possible, until twin streams of fire poured up into the air. The sharp echoes rolled away through the hills. They came promptly back from the opposite wall, and Dave Long knew that if still alive, Chispa Charley must have heard them.

"Quick with the fires, boys! The sooner we know what's afore us, the quicker we kin draw a free breath. Ef alive, we've got to rescue Chispa. Ef dead—then we've got to find the dirty hellions as putt him to sech tortur'!"

"And find them we will, if on top of the earth!" sternly cried Donald McLean, pouncing upon Windy Johnson as he added: "And to make sure of one, I'll just tie this bunch of rags to a rock, and—"

The oil-soaked cotton-waste was touched with a match, and with wonderful rapidity an intense light sprang up, sending its brilliant red rays far out over the canyon. And standing on the very verge, his eyes strained until it seemed as though they must pop from their sockets, Dave Long first caught sight of the black rock—and on it was a human figure!

A shout broke from his lips that was almost a shriek, and Donald McLean turned from Windy Johnson, without another care or thought for him.

"He's thar! It's Chispa! God above be thanked!"

And taking off his hat, Dave Long dropped to his knees on the edge of the canyon wall, bowing his head like one who returns thanks for some all-precious boon.

For there, clearly revealed by the red light of the roaring fires, was the waterfall. In its center the black rock. And upon that rock the figure of a man!

Not upright and proudly defiant as when we last gazed upon him. Hours had passed since then; hours, each minute of which had been a desperate, stubborn fight against death. Not

one man of ten thousand could have won the fight during one-tenth of the time this truly frightful ordeal had lasted. And so it is little marvel that Chispa Charley should show signs of exhaustion, if not of despair.

He was crouching on his knees, with one foot buried half-way to the knee in the water above the black rock, his body leaning up-stream the better to resist the fitful tugging and jerking of those cruel ropes, the ends of which were, doubtless, caught fast among the rocks and bowlders which lay hidden beneath the foam and swirling waters at the foot of the fall. His head was bent upon his chest, and one unfamiliar with the appearance of the black rock might easily have failed to recognize in that shapeless mass a human being.

A shout went up from the lungs of the men of Canaan as they saw Chispa Charley, and such was the will with which it was given that even the sullen roar of the hurrying waters was overpowered for the moment. And the glad sounds reached the ear of the man doing such desperate battle yonder in the midst of the waters, for the bowed head was lifted, turned partially around toward them!

Dave Long saw this, and leaped to his feet with a yell of honest joy that almost split his throat.

"Whooray, Chispa! Hang on, fer I'm a-comin'!"

"Say the word how, Dave, and I'm your man!" cried Donald McLean, his voice fervent enough, but his face grave and full of anxious doubt.

It was easy to say *coming*, but *how* were they to get there? Yet get there they must, by some means, for it was clear to all that Chispa Charley was nearly exhausted with his terrible fight for life. He could not help himself. And while they were trying to devise some means of effecting his rescue, the relentless, never-ceasing waters might easily tear him from his too-frail hold on life!

"Whar's Windy Johnson?"

Donald dashed to the spot where the crack-brain had been left when Dave Long uttered that glad yell, and found him still there, cowering close to the ground, muttering to himself like one saying his prayers.

Without a word, Donald grasped him by the shoulder and dragged him, moaning and mumbling, back to the brink of the canyon, handing him over to Dave Long.

"I didn't do it, nur yit I couldn't help it!" muttered the wretch, evidently believing that his time had overtaken him at last. "They swore me to keep still till the clock—"

"Tain't your life we want, Windy," Dave Long forced himself to utter in a calm, kind, soothing tone. "Chispa's still on top o' the deck, an' you hain't nothin' to be oneasy fer."

"Alive!" gasped Windy, venturing to open his bloodshot eyes and steal a glance around him.

"Alive yet, and maybe we can save him, if you speak out like a white man!" impatiently cried Donald McLean.

"All we want to know is how they got him over yender on the black rock," added Dave Long, motioning his impetuous friend to keep silent. "You said they done it with ropes, but how? They couldn't do it with a boat?"

Windy Johnson had regained composure sufficient to steal a glance out over the river, and by the brilliant light he saw and recognized Chispa Charley still on the black rock. And thus relieved of his worst fears, he hurriedly answered the questions put him by the Marshal of Canaan.

Even while he was speaking, explaining how the difficult feat was accomplished, Dave Long was laying his plans. He felt assured that Chispa Charley could not save himself by means of a rope being passed over the river and dropped down to him, even were his hands and arms at liberty. That long fight had too greatly weakened him and cramped his muscles.

"They's only one way!" he muttered, quite as much to himself as to those who were so anxiously awaiting his decision. "A man's got to go out thar to help him!"

"And I'm that man, if you'll only tell me how the job's to be done," promptly cried Donald McLean. "I'm a good swimmer. If there's no other way, I'll take a rope and try to make a landing on the black rock!"

The crowd gasped, then stood still. Not one among them but what would have run any ordinary risk to save Chispa Charley, but this was beyond them. They knew that any such attempt could end only in death. And Donald—true heart of gold!—knew it quite as well as they; but he made the offer in simple good faith. If accepted, he would never flinch or hesitate a moment in venturing.

"No man could do it," said Dave Long, slowly shaking his head. "An' even ef it could be done, what use? Chispa couldn't help himself. The minnit he left his holt on that rock, he'd go over the falls; an' you all know how *that'd* end."

"But something must be done! And that in a hurry!"

Dave Long shot a half-reproachful glance into the flushed face of the impatient young-

miner, but there was no trace of anger in his voice as he made reply:

"Not in a hurry—fer they won't be time to try a second plan ef the fu'st one slips up onto it. The minnit we kin see which is the best plan, be sure, lad, old Dave won't do the holdin' back."

Abashed by that grave, simple honesty, Donald caught the hand of the marshal between his own, pressing it warmly. He said no more, but stood in silence, waiting the decision of the one to whom they all looked instinctively as a leader.

It came soon, and announced in clear, rapid tones:

"A dozen o' you fellers take the best hosses an' pull out hot-foot fer the ford. Cross the river an' come up on the other side. Take stuff fer to make a fire, an' so we kin see to read each other's signs. Pull out—*lively!*"

Without stopping to ask a question, he was obeyed. The dozen men who first gained the horses, mounted and dashed away at breakneck speed. And then Dave Long took Donald McLean by the shoulder and led him a little to one side, saying gravely:

"We made one mistake at the jump-off, we was in such a hurry. We didn't bring any small rope, nur no light lassoes as a man might throw over the drink to—"

"If you want a rope taken over, say so, and and I'm the man can do it!" briskly interrupted Donald.

"You're dead sart'in?" eagerly asked Dave Long, his eyes flashing vividly. "They mustn't be no mistake. Ef you ain't dead sart'in, don't think o' sayin' so, fer *his* sake!"

"I can do it with my hands tied behind my back!" positively declared the young miner. "Not here, close to the fall, of course, but up the river a bit. It will be no more than boy's play fer me, man!"

Dave Long turned to one of the men standing near, saying:

"Tobe, git on a critter an' make after the other boys. Tell 'em to rig a rope an' be ready to drop it down the bank to Donald when he swims over. Take a coil o' rope with you, to make sure. Now, *git thar!*"

"It will take them nearly half an hour to get ready on the other bank—pray Heaven poor Chispa can hold out so long!" muttered Donald, a choking sensation in his throat that rendered his usually clear tones husky and indistinct.

"As nigh that as kin be," muttered Dave, anxiously. "But it's the only chainece I see fer the lad—the only chainece!"

"You are chief, and we follow. What you order, we'll do our best to carry out. But while waiting for the boys to get to their stations—for it won't take me long to cross that bit of moisture when I once get started—hadn't you better tell us just what your plans are? Of course I will stop on the other side, unless you want me back here, and—"

"I want you over yender to see that the boys do their part without a hitch or botch."

"As I supposed. And to do so understandingly, I must know just what you expect of us," was the quick retort.

"We want to git a rope stretched across the river fu'st. We've got men enough to keep it so tight they won't be no resk o' the slack's droppin' down into the water even while we bring it down the banks ontel it hangs right over the black rock, yender."

"And after that is done?"

"The rest'll be my part of the job," was the quiet response, then adding quickly: "Ef I don't tell you plain, Donald, it ain't beca'se I doubt you or the rest of the boys. It's beca'se I hain't got the knots clean picked out o' the tangle. But they'll get straight—they've got to! It's Chispa out yender, an' I couldn't go back onto him ef I wanted to!"

Donald McLean said no more, for he could place full dependence in the marshal. He knew Dave Long would not lie to either friend or foe, even as he knew that he would give his life, if no less would suffice, to save Chispa Charley from his perilous situation. Let fail who might, the odium would never rest on Dave Long while life was his.

"Afore we set about it, men, come here by me," said Dave, his face hard-set, his eyes glowing brighter even than the roaring cotton-waste. "Come here, an', looking into each other's eyes, with every heart onkivered an' plain to be read, le's sw'ar by all that earth holds dear to us—by the heavens over our heads an' by all that they hold o' truth an' love an' holiness—by light an' by darkness—by our claims to honor and manhood—that we'll try to ketch an' pay back the merciless hell-hounds as sarved poor Chispa this way! That we'll drop everythin' else, ef it needs so many, an' take the war-path ag'in' 'em all! That when we once ketch 'em, we'll wring full pay from 'em, law or no law! An' as we keep this pledge, may the good Lord keep faith with us!"

A wild yell of approval and assent burst from the lips of the crowd as they each one strove to grasp the hand of the speaker. But he waved them back, pointing out over the river, his voice hoarse and unsteady as he cried:

"See! Chispa hears ye, an' looks this way as a sign!"

He was right. The man kneeling on the black rock was turning his head, as though recording the oath. So it seemed to them, in that moment of intense excitement. In reality, the King of the Sports was looking to see how soon he might expect the long-delayed aid.

And it was some such thought as this that led Donald McLean to pick up a bundle of rope and set off up the canyon. Dave Long halted him and said:

"It's like both you an' me'll need all our stren'th, lad. Let the boys tote the rope, an' save your powers ag'in' the time o' more need."

Donald made no opposition, though a fleeting smile crossed his handsome face. He knew his powers so well, knew how little difficulty he would meet in crossing the river, rapid though it ran. But it was not worth while to try to explain this to the anxious marshal, himself no swimmer.

When Donald reached a point sufficiently distant from the falls, he began to strip to his drawers, at the same time directing the men with him what sort of loop to form in one end of the rope, and how they were to pay out the rope as he advanced. If they performed their part well, the only perilous moment would be when he should first strike the further side.

"If I don't hit a place where I can land and have a point of rock handy to use as a snubbing post, the current, acting on the slack, will tear the rope from me, or take me with it. If you feel it giving way and sweeping down-stream, haul in as fast as you can, and get it ready for another trial further up. I'll swim back without delay."

Their preparations were scarcely completed and Donald lowered to the narrow bench which ran along the edge of the water, when a brilliant light shot up on the further bank, announcing the arrival of the men sent around by way of the ford. And as Dave Long swung his hastily improvised torch over his head, the men came running up opposite.

By the bright lights, they could see what was doing, and Donald uttered a cheering shout of approval as he saw them arranging ropes to lower for him on his arrival.

Satisfied now that all was working well, Dave Long hurried back to the first halting-place, to complete his own preparations, his course rapidly becoming more and more clear in his mind's eye.

Carrying the loop over his right shoulder and under his left arm, so that the force of the current would hold it snugly in place, Donald plunged into the river, swimming with a speed and ease that fully justified his boasts. Despite the force of the current and its action upon the rope, he made his way nearly straight across the river. And as he struck the rocks, a rope from above was so deftly dropped that its snug loop struck him on the head. One brief struggle, and his part of the difficult task was complete.

First the swaying rope was drawn up to the wall above. Then a rope was lowered for him, and when he reached the top of the canyon wall, the men, under his orders, slowly moved down toward the fall, keeping the light but strong rope almost at a level with their own feet. Many hands make light work, and there was not a single laggard among all the men of Canaan, that night!

Dave Long was also ready, when the men reached his position, and by his commands they stood firm while he slipped a double rope, tied firmly to a large and strong iron ring taken from one of the wide "clinchers" which secure the Mexican saddle in place, over the end of the rope which now reached across the river, directly above the black rock and its silent occupant.

He stood in the clear light, and signaled to Donald, making signs for him to secure his end of the rope. When convinced that he was comprehended and obeyed, he stood on the brink of the canyon, saying to his men:

"Slack up a little on the rope, lads. So—steady! A few feet more—hold all! Take a couple or three turns 'round the smooth dornick, yender, and 'stan' by to see that she don't slip nur give."

Realizing how much depended on the care and exactness with which each of his orders was obeyed, Dave Long took time enough to assure himself that all was right in this quarter. Then he took another length of rope and carefully knotted it around the rope attached to the ring, giving the coil into the hands of two men whom he knew to be both cautious and quick-witted, saying:

"Pay this out as fast as you think it's safe, boys. Then, when the right time comes, an' I make this sign—*so!*—you want to draw her back, stiddy an' keeful. To the rest o' you lads, this comes: When I give the sign like *this*, you'll buckle down to the rope, an' stretch her as straight across the drink as you think she'll stand it. The rest 'll show plain enough when you've done so much. Now goodbye—*pray fer Chispa.*"

Holding a bundle of rope in his arms, carefully coiled, one end knotted around his chest, the other being that fastened to the ring which slip-

ped easily along the main rope, Dave Long moved out to the edge of the canyon. He pushed the ring over the verge, where a mass of cotton-waste kept the rope from chafing and wearing against the rock, and then lowered himself over the wall, clinging to the slender cable with both hands.

Steadily, yet rapidly the daring man made his way along the rope, out over the raging waters, toward the black rock where still knelt that dark figure, quivering and trembling as the angry waters at the base of the falls tugged and jerked at the pendent ropes, bravely fighting for life, love, revenge!

On crept the marshal, the rope swaying lower and lower as he advanced, until the breathless lookers-on feared a miscalculation had been made—feared that ere he could gain the rock his weight would bend the rope until his feet were grasped by the deadly waters; but glad disappointment was theirs when they saw Dave Long fairly land on the black rock!

What a wild, enthusiastic cheer went up from both sides of the river! How those strong, rough men hugged each other and danced around in mad joy as they saw Dave Long clasp poor Chispa Charley in his strong and true arms!

And on the rock?

"God be thanked! Chispa, dear boy! It's me—it's old Davy come to take you to land ag'in!"

He said no more. The wan smile which briefly lit up that terribly changed face unmanned him for a moment. His voice choked, and hot tears blinded his eyes. But they did not fall. They were drowned by the husky, unnatural tones that said:

"I can't weep—I can only curse!"

Never until that moment had Dave Long fully realized all that Chispa Charley must have suffered that night.

He felt the once powerful form tremble, shiver, grow weak and nerveless in his arms, and only his wonderful strength of body prevented them both from being dragged from the rock as Chispa Charley yielded to that frightful strain, now that rescue seemed assured. Fiercely he struggled, then as the killing strain suddenly slackened, he held Chispa with one arm, drawing his knife and severing the two ropes with a single blow.

Faintly he caught the sounds of a wild cheer from shore. He stole a single glance in that direction, and saw his men dancing and capering like a set of raving lunatics; but he had no time for a second look. Chispa was hanging a dead weight upon his arm, and he began to fear that even yet he might be too late to save him.

He took a flask of liquor from his bosom, and drawing the cork with his teeth, held the neck to the lips of the King of the Sports. For a moment Chispa gave no signs; but then, as Dave managed to shift his position a little, he gave a faint sigh, and swallowed a little of the reviving liquor.

Dave took a long swallow himself, for he knew not how far his powers might be tasked, then he cast the bottle from him. It was whirled over the falls, to go into a thousand pieces amid the rocks below.

Dave, supporting the almost unconscious sport across his left arm, used his right to fasten the strong girdle of horse-hair girths which he had secured to the lower end of the rope whose other end was furnished with the ring. This girdle he managed to fasten firmly around the body of Chispa Charley, then gave the signal that told the eagerly watching men on the bank to tighten up on the cable.

With a will they went to work, and presently Dave Long felt the weight lying across his arm was growing lighter. Little by little Chispa Charley was raised into the air as the cable tightened under the strong and careful manipulation of the men of Canaan. And then, when Chispa hung just beyond his reach, Dave Long gave the signal for the cable to be made fast once more.

In a few moments there came a sign announcing the completion of this part of his instructions, and the marshal made his final signal—the signal that told the two men to carefully haul in on the rope which was connected with the line that held the King of Sports suspended over the roaring waterfall.

Standing there on the moist black rock, Dave Long held his breath as he watched the slow progress of his friend toward the shore, at the same time moving gradually upward. A fear to which he had lent no ear when only his own life was endangered, now assailed him. What if the rope should break!

Strong man though he was, and never unnerved in the face of danger to himself, Dave Long now shivered and shut his eyes as that dread haunted him. He dared not look—he dared not watch the slow movement across the waters. But only for a brief space. Then, as a wild cheer came to his ears above the roaring of the tumbling waters, he opened his eyes, just in time to see strong hands lifting Chispa Charley over the edge of the canyon wall and bearing him back to still surer safety.

"Thank the good Lord fer savin' him!" he muttered, brushing one hand hastily across his suddenly-dimmed eyes.

Intense though the excitement was on shore over the successful rescue of Chispa Charley, the men of Canaan did not forget the brave, true heart to whose cool skill and quick wits that rescue was principally due, and shortly after the ringed rope was thrust over the escarpment, weighted with a fragment of rock. The cable was lowered, until the weight of the rock sent the ring sliding steadily along toward the black rock where Dave Long caught it deftly.

He buckled the girths around his body, then gave the signal to hoist away on the cable. With ringing cheers the men obeyed, and then the trusty hands at the guide-rope did their duty, safely hauling the marshal along the tightly-stretched cable until he touched the face of the canyon wall. Then he was hauled up by eager hands and helped over the verge. He started to unfasten the girths, but a ready knife cut the rope instead, and a wild yell went up from the men of Canaan as they picked him up bodily, "chairing" him on their shoulders and prancing around the fire-lighted spot where lay Chispa Charley, alive, conscious, but oh! so haggard, so aged, so altered in every way from the gay and light-hearted man who had, only a few hours before, bidden them drink to the health of the lovely lady and the happiest man in all the land!

With his smiles changed to tears, Dave Long struggled out of the hands of his friends, and leaping to the ground, sunk on his knees beside the friend of his honest heart. He took his hand and pressed it gently. He brushed the damp hair from his blood-stained forehead. He softly uttered his sympathy, and repeated his thanks to high Heaven for its mercies.

At that word, Chispa Charley smiled—but there was no mirth, no thankfulness in it. Instead, it seemed a curse! And without a word he turned his person so the light fell full upon his scarred and bloody back.

"Who done it?" hoarsely demanded Dave, his eyes aglow.

"Walter Teemer and his gang; Romeo Bugg was one."

"The demons! I'll hunt 'em down if it takes—"

Chispa Charley touched his arm, saying slowly:

"No, you won't, Dave. *They belong to me, body and soul!*"

CHAPTER XIV.

BEFORE HIS MAJESTY, KING GRIZZLY.

If Dick Morley was not what he claimed—if all this was acting on his part—then he was indeed letter-perfect in the role he had assumed.

As Fremont Metcalf scornfully brushed aside his trembling hands, refusing the quivering clasp, uttering those words of mingled anger and loathing, the old man bowed his head lowly, his hands fluttering back to his breast as though to still the painful throbbing of his heart. A faint, husky sound that might have been a moan or stifled curse parted his lips. And then, without further speech, he turned and passed away, his steps feeble and uncertain, his movements like those of a blind man, deserted by his accustomed guide.

Fremont watched him until he disappeared around the turn in the narrow passage, then his arms closed more tightly about the form of the agitated maiden. With gentle force he drew her to the rude pallet, caressing her much as an elder brother might caress a frightened, troubled child.

"Do no worry sister. Forget the cunning old scoundrel."

Dinorah impulsively placed a hand over his lips, but not in time to smother the epithet.

"Brother! Not that! Do not say such cruel words! Only think! if it *should* prove true that he is our father!"

Fremont gave a start of impatience, and his voice was hot and hard as he replied:

"Our father—that hoary villain! Dinorah, you know better. You know that father is dead. You know that this fellow was proven a villain and an impostor. Chispa was satisfied on that point, and so were you, before—"

"Before I saw and heard him tell his story, as now. Could a man lie with such fervor, such pathetic eloquence? Brother, I cannot believe him false! I believe he *is* our father!"

"And I *know* he is a cunning impostor, the tool of Walter Teemer," almost harshly retorted Fremont. "If he could throw dust in my eyes as he seems to have blinded you, their end would be nearly won. As our father he would be the owner of all the property. If we were to acknowledge him as such, he would take possession. And then—when his hands were full, and nothing more remained for him to gain through us, the end is easily predicted. Poison, or perhaps the quicker hands of this infernal gang of cut-throats, would clear his path of us both!"

Dinorah said no more. She saw that Fremont was firmly convinced that he had penetrated the secret motive which led Dick Morley to act thus, and she knew that the more she said in favor of the man who had so strangely impressed her, the more stubbornly Fremont would hold to his belief. And so, her poor brain in a dizzy whirl,

her heart bleeding with fear for its master, gallant Chispa Charley, she lay in the arms of her brother.

Worn and weary from their enforced vigil and hard ride through the mountains though they might have been under different circumstances, neither Fremont nor Dinorah could sleep. Her eyes were closed, and he remained silent, motionless, thinking she slumbered, but black and bitter, sad and troubled, were the thoughts that racked their brains as the hours slowly dragged past.

Reason told them that the new day had dawned—the day to which they had looked forward with such happy anticipations!—but only the dull red light of the lantern made the darkness visible there in that gloomy cave.

No one came to break in on their meditations. Now and then a faint sound of human voices came to their ears from the outer chambers of that strange den, telling them that some at least of the Rocky Mountain Menagerie were astir; but that was all.

Fremont gently placed his sister on the pallet, still believing she was sleeping, then examined his curiously gained weapons once more. He was hiding them upon his person where he could readily grasp them in case of an emergency, while they could not be detected easily by the enemy, when Dinorah gently but firmly grasped one of the pistols, drawing it from his hands before he suspected her intention. She said:

"For him, brother. He may try to separate us. If he does—if you live to see Charley—tell him that though he may weep, he need never blush for his promised bride!"

Fremont said nothing. He feared to trust his voice just then. His eyes were misty, and Dinorah seemed but a shadowy phantom before them. For the first time his proud spirit began to waver, his courage to fail him.

The weapons were scarcely hidden about their persons before the trampling of feet echoed along the passage, and Mountain Lion, still wearing his hideous disguise, entered the cell. He carried a battered tray covered with warm food, while close behind him came Rattlesnake with water and a bottle of wine.

He laughed a little as he saw the untouched viands in the corner, saying, as he deposited the tray before them:

"You don't appear very hearty eaters, either of you, my honored friends! Can it be possible that you hold a grudge against the Menagerie? Come! Life is too short for holding anything of the kind over night. You are only biting off your noses to spite your own faces! But, drink, and be merry. If you can't be merry, be as merry as you can!"

Turning to take the jug and bottle from Rattlesnake, he added:

"If not equal to a wedding feast, surely there is a polite sufficiency of both food and drink! Still, if there is anything either of you would particularly like—"

"Your absence, above all else," tartly interposed Fremont.

"Granted, for half an hour," laughed Mountain Lion, with a shrug of his hairy shoulders. "At the end of that time I will return, for the purpose of escorting you to the throne of King Grizzly. As the audience may be both long and trying, I advise you to interview the chuck as thoroughly as may be in the mean time. Crawl off, Rattlesnake!"

With a startling imitation of the cry of the animal whom he represented, the masked outlaw followed the lead of his still more repulsive-looking companion, leaving the prisoners alone together.

Young, healthy, hearty as both were, neither Dinorah nor Fremont felt the least inclination for food, but as they knew not how severely their powers might be tested by their relentless enemy, they forced themselves to eat. And after the first few mouthfuls, they found it no hard task to partially clear the platter of the really well-cooked food.

Promptly at the expiration of the period mentioned, Mountain Lion returned, accompanied by two of his fellows, one of whom wore the disguise of a red fox. All traces of levity had vanished, and the outlaw was silently, coldly polite in his demeanor.

At their appearance, both Fremont and his sister rose to their feet, pale but composed. Though they each had resolved to fight hard when the proper time came, it was not now. They could not afford to risk a premature discovery of their arms.

At a sign from Mountain Lion, Rattlesnake and Red Fox took Fremont by the arms, holding him lightly, yet in such manner that they fully controlled his movements. Mountain Lion, with a low bow, offered his arm to Dinorah. With the slightest possible show of hesitation, she accepted it, and the outlaw led the way from the cell. Through the narrow passage, across one chamber, into another crooked tunnel, then suddenly emerging from the gloom into brightness, from contracted quarters into the spacious main cavern.

It was a weirdly curious scene which greeted them, and despite their natural anxiety, both

Fremont and Dinorah were strongly impressed with it.

The rocky walls were thickly studded with lights, while nearly as many more depended from the rudely-arched ceiling. These last were secured upon rude chandeliers, and though they were only the common "star" candles, their number was sufficient to clearly, almost brilliantly, light up the chamber.

In shape the chamber was nearly oval. At one end was a raised dais, covered over with blankets and robes. On this was a sort of throne, occupied by King Grizzly, in all the glory of his hairy disguise.

The Menagerie, all wearing their masks, were ranged on either side of the chamber, forming a broken semicircle. And through the opening left directly before the throne, Mountain Lion passed with Dinorah on his arm. He paused before the throne, bowing low, with apparent reverence as he said:

"Your majesty, I have obeyed orders. Your guests are here. What is your further pleasure?"

"Let the gentleman stand. For the lady I have reserved a portion of my throne," said King Grizzly, moving along a little on his hairy seat, making room for another at his side.

But Dinorah slipped from the grasp of Mountain Lion, springing back and throwing her arms around the neck of her brother, her pale face turned with a look of loathing upon the grim King of the Menagerie.

There was no need for words. Her action and her looks spoke far plainer. They said she would die rather than submit to such degradation.

King Grizzly started to his feet, and a hoarse sound escaped his lips. His gloved hands clinched tightly, and he seemed on the point of leaping from his throne to tear the maiden from the embrace of her brother by main force. But this mad fit lasted only a moment. With a low, mocking bow, he spoke:

"When beauty wills, there is naught but submission for chivalry. Since the lady declines a seat on the throne, Mountain Lion, place a chair for her there."

"Not for me," cried Dinorah, her proud spirit flashing forth despite her more prudent resolutions. "I do not accept even the ghost of a favor from one who has shown himself as cruel and heartless as he is treacherous and cowardly! I am here to share the fate of my brother, and as he fares, so will I—his fate shall be mine!"

"Together, to the end, sister!" and as he spoke, Fremont Metcalf flashed a glance of defiance around that grim congregation. "Who dares try to part us?"

There was no reply to this fierce challenge. King Grizzly shrugged his shoulders and settled himself more comfortably on his throne. His followers took the cue from him, and even Mountain Lion drew further back, leaving brother and sister standing alone together in the circle before the throne.

There was a brief silence, then King Grizzly spoke, his voice coming cold and stern from beneath his grim mask:

"Fremont Metcalf, and Dinorah Metcalf, hearken. You have been brought before me, accused of an unpardonable crime. You stand accused of having bitterly wronged one of this League. It is charged that by bloodshed, by perjury, by fraud, you have not only robbed a member of his property, but in addition set a brand upon his brow that can only be wiped out by death!"

"These charges have been sworn to. They have been duly considered, carefully investigated, and found to be true. You have been arrested and brought before this tribunal for judgment. You are now placed upon your trial, to answer whether or no these charges are founded on fact."

"Fremont Metcalf, what plea do you enter?"

"I make no plea," was the cold, sharp reply. "I simply state a fact. The charges are nothing but a string of lies from beginning to end. They came from a liar, and a liar has just repeated them!"

The hands of King Grizzly clinched tightly. A low murmur ran around the semicircle of masked men. Dinorah clung more tightly to the neck of her rash brother, her face losing all traces of color, for she, too, feared his bold speech would prove fatal to him.

Instead, King Grizzly laughed shortly, harshly.

"You are terribly bold, Fremont Metcalf, while under the protecting arm of a woman!"

"Which fact serves you even better," was the retort. "Only for the presence of that woman, I would kill you before one of your gang of cut-throats and thieves could lift a hand to save you! Were I here alone, you would—"

Dinorah placed a hand over her lips, checking the impetuous speech. She hurriedly whispered:

"For my sake, Fremont, do not anger him more! Wait—the time is not yet!"

Fremont cast a swift glance around them. He saw that the Mountain Lion and several others of the Menagerie were within short leaping distance of him. He saw that they were ready to leap upon and overpower him in case of open rebellion, and he managed to smother his raging passions for the moment.

King Grizzly laughed once more, then spoke:

"For which the lady in question has my heartfelt thanks. The time may come when I can express them in more agreeable terms, when fewer critics are present to take notes. And with this hope, if you please, we will get back to pure business."

"This member of our family whom you have defrauded of his rights, has appealed to us for relief and justice. Not only for the property which you have stolen, but for vengeance upon the assassins of his predecessor."

"Your father, of course!"

"We acknowledge no names, no relationships here," was the cold reply. "We are simply limbs of one trunk. One of those limbs you have lopped off before its time. Another you have marked with a cruel blight that must be cured, or it will end fatally."

"Bah!" with a bitter laugh. "You are making miserable work of this, Walter Teemer. As you put it a while since, come down to business. Throw off your flimsy disguise, your silly affectation, and get down to bed-rock. Say what you have played this vile trick for. What do you hope to gain?"

King Grizzly seemed taken aback by this outspoken challenge. It showed him how little his fantastic masquerade had impressed the stalwart young mine-owner, how little he cared for those hideous masks surrounding him. And he saw that the task he had set himself might prove even more difficult than he had fancied when he took the first step.

But he quickly recovered himself, and retorted:

"You will find the proceedings interesting enough before you reach the end, Fremont Metcalf, never fear. But as this interview is, after all, only preliminary, I will gratify you so far. Dropping the king, we will speak together as man to man."

"A man I claim to be, but *you*—bah!"

The words were not much, but the accents, the look of utter loathing which filled the handsome face, the gesture of contempt which accompanied them, cut to the very quick.

King Grizzly started to his feet, crouching as though about to leap from the throne, one hand clutching a revolver. For one moment the life of the daring prisoner hung by a very thread; then the chief of the outlaws mastered himself and sunk back upon his throne. His voice was hoarse and harsh as he spoke again:

"You are cutting your own throat, Fremont Metcalf! You are digging your own grave with your mouth! Once more, I warn you! Be prudent, or you shall suffer the consequences!"

For the second time Dinorah checked the hot temper of young mine-owner.

"For *my* sake, brother!" she whispered, agitatedly. "Our one hope lies in gaining time. Without that, our fates are sealed beyond redemption. Guard your temper, and do not anger the cruel wretch needlessly."

Fremont himself saw how reckless he had been. Not for himself would he consent to play a part, but as he thought how desperate were the chances for Dinorah, he choked down his bitter scorn and hatred, resolving to hold them in stern check.

King Grizzly watched them through the apertures in his hairy mask, plainly impatient, but seeming to feel that Dinorah was fighting his battle better than he could do it himself. He was on the point of speaking again, when Mountain Lion took a step forward and bowed, clearly inviting permission to speak.

"What is it?" shortly demanded the ill-humored monarch.

"Humbly begging pardon of your majesty for interfering, even for a moment, I wish to utter one word."

"You have permission—why don't you speak?" sourly.

Mountain Lion again bowed, adding:

"It is my painful duty to inform your majesty that there is a vile traitor in our midst, who has—"

With an angry growl beneath his grim mask, King Grizzly swiftly waved his hand to check the speech, muttering harshly:

"Stop! we have no time to enter on that subject at present. Fall back and wait my pleasure. What!" he angrily growled, as Mountain Lion still kept his place, making no sign of obedience.

"Do you dare disobey my commands?"

"For your own sake, your majesty, I must speak," was the low but firm response. "I am making no allusions to that note of warning, though it may well be that the same hand has doubly offended against your majesty and the laws governing the Menagerie."

"What is it, then?" with poorly-concealed impatience.

Mountain Lion cast a rapid and comprehensive glance around him, making at the same time an almost imperceptible sign with one hand. He saw Fremont Metcalf covertly removing the arms of his sister from about his neck, and hastily cried:

"Some one of the band has supplied the prisoner with weapons—on guard, men!"

From the first, Fremont Metcalf suspected what was coming. For one brief interval his heart ceased to beat, his blood ran cold in his veins, as he felt that all was lost. Then a cold

desperation seized upon him, and striving to do so without awaking her suspicions of the cause, or attracting the notice of the Menagerie, he freed himself from the clasp of Dinorah.

One hand slipped beneath his clothes and grasped the butt of the revolver given him by Dick Morley. He moved a single pace apart from Dinorah, to lessen her risk, and then, as he saw that all was lost, he drew the pistol, and, with a wild cry, leveled it full at the head of the startled King Grizzly.

This was done just as Mountain Lion uttered his cry of warning; but before a hand could be placed on the desperate prisoner, his weapon exploded, and with a hoarse cry King Grizzly plunged headlong from his throne, striking the stone floor and rolling over and over like a dead man.

"You go first, cursed hound!" grated Fremont, savagely.

CHAPTER XV.

RED FOX ANSWERS A QUESTION.

He was given time to say no more, to strike never another blow for the life which he felt was rapidly drawing to an end. And had he not been swift as thought itself in his actions, he would not have had time for discharging that one shot, for Mountain Lion leaped upon him with ferocious energy, instantly backed by his Menagerie companions, warned by that silent signal of his.

His pistol had scarcely cracked, King Grizzly had hardly vacated his throne, when Fremont Metcalf staggered and fell to the rock-floor like a drunken man, with a horrible, roaring sound in his ears as the heavy pistol-butt, driven by the muscular arm of Mountain Lion descended upon his head. It seemed as though the bones must give way beneath that savage stroke, and Dinorah was smitten with a sickening fear that such was indeed the case, as she witnessed the fall of her brother.

Until then she had stood like one petrified with fear and amazement. Until the rash shot was fired, she had not the slightest suspicion of the purpose of her brother. Her usually swift comprehension was dulled with wonder how Mountain Lion could have learned of those weapons.

But as Fremont Metcalf fell in a quivering heap beneath the clubbed revolver of Mountain Lion, a wave of insane fury seemed to sweep over her.

She forgot herself. She only thought of her poor brother, dead or dying. She only saw his slayer, drawing back the blood-stained weapon as though to deal another blow.

And swiftly drawing the pistol from its place of concealment upon her person, Dinorah sprung forward and fired one shot, the muzzle almost buried in the hairy disguise of the outlaw lieutenant.

Mountain Lion uttered a sharp, agonized yell, then staggered back, falling into the arms of his nearest comrades. The revolver dropped from his grasp, his limbs grew limp and helpless. If not a dead man, it was clear he was badly hurt.

But Dinorah never gave him a second glance or thought. She dropped her pistol the instant the shot was fired, and forgetting her own peril, sunk on her knees beside the prostrate form of her brother, sobbing, gasping:

"Brother—darling brother! Look up—speak to me, if only a word—only a word to say that you are not dead!"

She paid no attention to the wildly excited members of the Menagerie. She heeded not if she heard the savage threats toward both herself and Fremont which broke from their masked lips as some gathered around the fallen Mountain Lion, while still others hastened to the assistance of King Grizzly. She failed to realize the full import of the loud cry of wonder and delight which went up from the latter section, even when the loud sound caused her to glance mechanically in that direction. And though she saw King Grizzly rise unaided to his feet and stride toward her, she failed to even wonder at or regret the seeming miracle. She had only thoughts, fears, feelings for Fremont Metcalf, and in his benefit she appealed to King Grizzly as she might have appealed to a friend.

"Help! lend him aid if you be a man! He is not dead—I can feel his heart throbbing beneath the pressure of my hand! You will not stand by and see his life go out for want of a little care? You will save him for me? Think! he is all I have on earth, now! Help—aid him, I beg of you!"

In his headlong tumble from the throne to the rocky floor, King Grizzly had burst the fastenings which held his grim mask in place, and when he arose, he left the disguise behind. His bruised and discolored features were visible now as he stood before Dinorah, listening to her wild, almost incoherent pleadings, and they seemed doubly ferocious and repulsive, filled, as they were with a savage triumph and hatred.

In a contracting circle of which they formed the center, the Menagerie gathered, handling knives and pistols as though eager to use them on the living or the dead. And prominent among them towered the giant, Silver-tip.

Where others only muttered and growled, he spoke out plainly:

"Say the word, boss, an' we'll run the blamed critter up to the ceilin' with a hitch 'round his thrapple! Ef he's a dead 'coon, we kin use his karkidge fer a can'te-holder, anyhow! Jes' give the wink, boss, an' we'll snatch him up so quick it'd make your head swim!"

The expression of villainous gloating fled from the battered face of King Grizzly, and a look of irritation came in its place as he wheeled upon Silver-tip and growled:

"Fall back, all of you! When I need your assistance, I'll call for it. Fall back, I say!"

His ireful commands were promptly obeyed, even by the irrepressible Silver-tip, and King Grizzly was left alone beside the brother and sister.

A little beyond was Mountain Lion, half-supported by two of his fellows, who seemed to be searching for his wound.

Dinorah Metcalf was once more bending over the motionless form of her brother, gently wiping away the blood that trickled from a wound in his scalp. Clearly she had forgotten her surroundings for the time being.

Then, as the pale, deathlike face of her loved one suddenly twitched, as the half-closed lids opened, as the limp muscles grew stiffer for a moment, a sobbing cry escaped her lips, and she passionately kissed him again and again.

"Thank God! Brother—darling brother, look—"

A heavy hand closed upon her shoulder, and fairly tore her away from the side of her brother. She uttered a low, shivering cry, her eyes filled with terror as they met the lurid glare of those wicked orbs; but even then she seemed unable to fully comprehend the situation. And little wonder! when all that she had suffered, bodily and mentally, that night is recalled to mind.

King Grizzly slipped his other arm about her waist, drawing her closely to him, laughing malignantly as he said:

"Turn about is fair play, my angel! He has had his innings, and the rest of those kisses belong to me."

"He is hurt—he is dying—help him!" murmured Dinorah, feebly struggling to free herself, through instinct rather than reason.

"Does that look like a dying man?" laughed King Grizzly, as he lifted her clear off the ground and leaped hastily back.

Fremont Metcalf had seen his action, recognized his face, and that lent him strength and nerve to spring to his feet, one hand clutching the haft of the knife furnished him by Dick Morley. He drew the bright weapon, but overpowered nature could do no more. As he strove to leap upon the villain and tear from his degrading grasp the helpless maiden, a dizzy blur passed before his eyes, and he reeled like a drunken man.

"Take him, ye beasts!" cried King Grizzly, retreating with his prize to the foot of the throne. "Take him, but don't use any more force than you can help. He's worth his weight in gold to the family!"

Silver-tip leaped upon the blinded youth, wresting the knife from his grasp, flinging it far aside with the same motion, then clasping him in his brawny arms, lifting him clear of the floor, laughing hoarsely at his vain struggles.

"Simmer down, ye p'izen critter!" he roared, between his bursts of laughter. "It's the great gran'daddy o' Samson an' Goliath as is got ye now, an' ef ye don't 'have yerself, he'll spank ye so you won't want to set down fer a month to come—'deed he jes' will, honey!"

The struggle was short as useless. Something in his overtaken brain seemed to snap, and Fremont Metcalf lay nerveless in the arms of the giant outlaw.

King Grizzly was closely watching the scene, and an angry ejaculation escaped his lips as he saw this.

"Look to him, you hounds! If you've killed him, Silver-tip, I'll take his worth out of your bones—mark that!"

His words seemed to lend Dinorah supernatural strength, for she wrested herself free from his grasp, and darted to the side of her brother before the chief could prevent her.

Silver-tip also was impressed with the savage speech of the chief, as uncomfortably if not as painfully as Dinorah, and with a muttered grunt of disgust, he relaxed his grasp and permitted Fremont to slip from his arms into those of his sister.

With a power lent by the emergency, Dinorah lowered his limp and nerveless form to the ground, supporting his head on her bosom. And thus she held him while one of the Menagerie, who apparently acted as surgeon and doctor to the band, carefully examined the unconscious man.

"There's no bones broken—no serious injury, so far as I can see," he uttered, drawing back a little, and extending a hand toward the nearest mask, with a gesture which seemed perfectly intelligible, as a liquor flask was promptly placed in his hand. "It is only the excitement, I reckon. A taste of this elixir and he'll—What did I tell you?"

The last words were uttered in a tone of triumph, for the flask had hardly touched the lips of Fremont Metcalf ere his eyes opened and he uttered a faint sigh.

"Swallow a few drops—that's it my hearty!" added the doctor, nodding his shaggy head vigorously as Fremont obeyed. "You're worth a wagon load of dead men, yet! And if you'll try to curb that ugly temper of yours a trifle, you'll get along without any further trouble—thanks to a mighty thick skull of your own!"

King Grizzly strode forward, looking down into the pale face of the young mine-owner, his voice cold and menacing as he uttered:

"Look you here, Fremont Metcalf. What is done is done, and can't be helped. But if you play any more tricks, somebody has got to suffer—and that somebody is your dainty sister!"

As he spoke, his heavy hand rested on the shoulder of the maiden. He nodded, and the doctor lifted Fremont from her lap, holding him firmly, yet not roughly while King Grizzly added:

"I hold her as a pledge that you will behave yourself as long as this interview lasts. Cut up rusty, and she will be the one to suffer for your folly. Are your wits clear enough to comprehend this fact?"

Weak in body though he was, Fremont was still undaunted in spirit, and he cried almost savagely:

"Still living, you hound! I thought I had sent you to your master!"

"It's no fault of yours that you failed," laughed King Grizzly, making a motion toward his hairy mask.

Silver-tip hastened to pick it up and hand it to him. With one finger thrust through a round hole at the base of one of the blunt ears, the outlaw chief added:

"I fancied I felt the wind of your lead, and here is the proof that my imagination did not run away with me. I only saw one way to dodge your compliment, and took it without hesitation. Better a tumble than a grave."

All this time King Grizzly had maintained his grasp on the arm of Dinorah Metcalf, and now, with a swift movement she was wholly powerless to evade or resist, he picked her up in his arms and strode back to the robe-covered throne. He lowered her to a seat beside him, laughing coarsely as he saw the vain struggles of the maddened brother.

Dinorah, fearing the worst for him, cried out pleadingly:

"Brother, for my sake! I am safe—the villain dares not harm me. Dear brother, yield, and bide your time."

That appeal had an almost magical effect. Fremont ceased his worse than useless struggles, and with a desperate effort of will brought his hot temper under control. And though his guards, at a sign from King Grizzly, released his arms, stepping aside and back, he made no move, save to fold his arms across his bosom.

Though his face was pale as that of a corpse where the blood did not streak it, he seemed to have fully recovered his wonted strength of both body and mind.

King Grizzly nodded approvingly, even while his grasp tightened upon the hand of the woman at his side.

"That looks more like it! I am happy to see your return to your sober senses, prisoner; may it last forever!"

"What more have you to say?" coldly demanded Fremont, his steady, burning gaze fixed upon the bruised, discolored face of his merciless foe. "Play the farce out, and quickly."

King Grizzly made a signal which caused his Menagerie to resume their former stations, all save Mountain Lion. He lay on a hastily improvised pallet, a few paces from the spot where he had fallen before the aim of the half-crazed maiden.

His hairy mask had been removed, the better to expose his wound, and as his head was slightly elevated by a roll of blankets, his face was distinctly revealed. It was pale as death, but still handsome, after a bold, reckless fashion. And as Dinorah shudderingly glanced in that direction, she caught the bright, almost fierce glitter of the dark eyes. At least, Mountain Lion was not dead.

"Fremont Metcalf," said King Grizzly, his voice grave, cold and hard; "you have heard the charges brought against you and your sister. You have been tried, found guilty, and your punishment decided upon, though the execution has been postponed. How long it will be delayed, or if it is ever performed, depends mainly on yourself."

A smile of bitter scorn curled the lips of the young mine-owner as King Grizzly paused in his deliberate speech. The pretext was so thin it did not deceive him for a moment.

"You are given one chance to escape the death you have doubly deserved. If you accept that chance, you may go free, taking with you your sister. If you refuse—you will suffer death by torture; she will suffer worse than death!"

Fremont started as though to spring at the throat from whence came that terribly significant threat; but it was only for an instant. He

caught the appealing glance of Dinorah, and for her sake he choked down his fierce rage.

"In other words, you want money," he simply said.

"The property or property's worth of which you defrauded me—yes!" impetuously cried Walter Teemer, his blackened eyes all aglow. "You two are to be held for ransom. If the sum demanded is paid within a reasonable period, you can go your way in peace, sound in wind and limb."

"And if we decline to submit to your demands?"

"If the money is not furnished within a reasonable period, so much the worse for you and your dainty sister, here," slowly replied King Grizzly. "If there is any delay, or if any effort is made to discover your place of concealment, all the powers of earth and Heaven can't save you or her!"

"Of course you have full license to speak for the powers of the last-named place," sneered Fremont. "One who didn't know you for the cowardly rascal you really are, might think you an archangel."

"I am your master, at all events!"

"Perhaps—not. But if you have anything more to say on this point, please hurry through with it."

"I have said all I need, on that score, for the present," replied King Grizzly, recovering his composure with an evident effort. "But there is one other point which you can—and must—clear up."

"Must is a big word," quietly uttered the prisoner.

"But one you will have to swallow, mind that! Who gave you those weapons?" fiercely demanded King Grizzly.

Fremont smiled coldly, but only closed his lips tightly.

A savage snarl broke from the bruised lips of King Grizzly as he saw this, for it told him only too plainly that, master as he was in that company, he was openly defied by a prisoner.

"Once more I ask you—who gave you those weapons?" he grated, his eyes glowing wickedly.

"When you find out, let me know, please," laughed Fremont.

In his mad rage King Grizzly started to his feet, only to sink back again as he caught a slight gesture from Mountain Lion.

He spoke sharply:

"Silver-tip, take aid and bring Mountain Lion forward."

The giant hastened to obey, and aided by three of his fellow beasts, Mountain Lion was lifted on the robes and carried to the foot of the throne. He signed for Silver-tip to raise his head, and supported on the knee of the giant, he said in faint, faltering accents:

"Your majesty, perhaps I can make this cloudy point clear—if you will—have patience with—my weakness."

"Give him brandy—he's too weak to speak," ordered the head of the Menagerie.

Silver-tip produced a capacious flask, and held it to the lips of the wounded robber. He drank heartily, and the effects of the powerful agent were almost immediately visible. His voice grew stronger, his words issuing with less difficulty than he had previously experienced.

"Your majesty, there can be little doubt as to who is the traitor in this case—and I suspect that the same agency was at the bottom of that mysterious note of warning. I accuse Red Fox of being a traitor to the Menagerie!"

There was a bustle among the members of the band, and at a signal from the chief, the man wearing the disguise of a red fox was grasped, disarmed and led forward to the foot of the throne. King Grizzly gazed at him steadily for a brief space, then he spoke, his tones cold and hard:

"What do you say, Red Fox? Guilty or not guilty?"

"When I hear the charges in full, your majesty, I will make my plea," quietly replied the accused.

Fremont Metcalf gave a start as he heard that voice, and Dinorah shrunk away with a low, painful gasp that plainly told she also recognized the tones. King Grizzly flashed a swift, searching glance into her pale face, then turned again to the wounded outlaw.

"I repeat my charge, your majesty," Mountain Lion said, the excitement seeming to lend him renewed life. "As you are aware I had command of the men who brought the prisoners to the den. As I was responsible for them, I neglected no precautions to keep them safe and secure."

"Though I knew you had had them searched for concealed weapons when they were taken prisoner at the Teemer mansion, I searched them again with my own hands when I placed them in the cell, as directed by you. I swear by my faith as one of the Family, that they were wholly unarmed when I left them."

His voice was growing husky and uncertain, and he motioned for the bottle. Silver-tip placed it in his hand, and the wounded man drank freely.

"Your majesty knows what my instructions were; to treat the prisoners with all respect and consideration, while taking ample precautions

against their escaping. I obeyed orders to the very letter. I left them in the cell as directed, and set a guard over them in the passage. That guard was Red Fox. And unless he went to sleep on his post, no mortal being could have passed him to enter or leave that cell, without his aid and knowledge. For that reason I say he is the guilty one!"

During all this, Red Fox stood erect between his two guards. If his face betrayed any emotion or fear, it was hidden from view by the hairy mask he wore.

King Grizzly now addressed him, demanding sharply:

"What have you to say, Red Fox? Did you supply the prisoner with weapons, as Mountain Lion charges?"

"I did, your majesty."

A mutter of astonishment and rage ran through the ranks of the Menagerie, and more than one weapon flashed forth from its sheath, glittering in the rays of the many candles. But a commanding motion from King Grizzly instantly checked this outburst, and once more silence reigned. He spoke, coldly:

"Your reasons for this strange conduct, Red Fox?"

"Are easily told," as coolly replied the accused. "I wished them to have the means of defending themselves against their enemies."

"And you see the result! One of the most faithful and efficient members of the family lies dying at your feet! Your officer, too!" sternly uttered the chief.

Red Fox glanced into the pale face of the wounded man, and there was a trace of pity in his voice as he made reply:

"I am sorry—that another does not fill his place!"

King Grizzly showed his teeth, with a savage snarl.

"Perhaps you prefer that I lay there?"

"I did not say so, your majesty."

"But meant it, plainly enough! Never mind that, for the present. Tell me—why did you run this risk in their behalf, when you must have known the first use of those weapons would surely expose your agency in the matter?"

"A greater danger threatened them. I gave them weapons to defend themselves against their blackest, bitterest enemy."

"Whom do you mean by that?"

"I mean *you*!" was the bold reply.

"What is your interest in them? Why run such risks?"

"Why?" with a short, hard laugh, as he wrested his arms free and caught at the hairy mask on his head, tearing it off and flinging it aside as he added: "Because they are my children! Because I am their father!"

The face revealed was that of Dick Morley, pale but resolute.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MASTER AND HIS TOOL.

CLEAR and distinct, without the slightest trace of fear or hesitation, rung out the tones of Dick Morley. And his pale, deeply-lined countenance showed naught of dread or apprehension as he so boldly, proudly confronted King Grizzly, though few among those within the rock-chamber but believed he was pronouncing his own death-warrant in uttering those words.

King Grizzly himself seemed taken aback, and his face flushed hotly beneath that clear, undaunted gaze. He glanced rapidly, covertly around him, as though to see how his Menagerie took the admission, rather than confession. His fingers quivered and crept closer to his weapons. His feet separated, his body bent a trifle forward, like one ready to make a sudden leap for life or revenge.

A brief silence followed, breathless, painful; then King Grizzly raised his right hand with a gesture that caused Silver-tip and his men to dart forward and secure the bold delinquent once more, holding him helpless at the mercy of the chief. The rest of the Menagerie crowded closer, their hands filling with weapons, their eyes glowing and flashing through the holes in their grim masks.

It seemed as though Dick Morley's hour of doom was on the point of striking. All eyes were fixed upon the face of King Grizzly, one word from whom might set each weapon in motion. Fremont Metcalf averted his face, while Dinorah covered hers over with her trembling hands, heart-sick and faint, for stronger than ever came the conviction that this was indeed the parent for whom they had mourned so many years!

The motion was made, but it was a signal that caused each weapon to return to its sheath, the grim masks falling back to their former positions, save the trio who held Red Fox in charge.

In cold and measured tones the chief spoke:

"Red Fox, by your own lips you stand condemned. You have violated your most sacred oaths. You have caused the mortal wounding of an officer and a brother. His blood is on your head, as surely as though it flowed by a blow direct from your own hand. The plea you offer in self-defense—"

"I make no plea, no defense," steadily interposed the accused, showing no outward signs of

emotion. "I have broken the rules governing the Menagerie, and I did so with my eyes open. I am ready to suffer the penalty."

"Which your once brothers shall pronounce," coldly added King Grizzly, glancing around the semicircle of grim masks. "Children of the woods and mountains! You have heard the crime of which Red Fox is guilty. It remains for you to judge him. In your hands lies his punishment. What shall it be?"

"Death!"

In one deep and hollow tone came the fatal word from each and every member of the grim band. And like an echo the word was repeated by the lips of King Grizzly.

"DEATH!"

He lifted his right hand, and Silver-tip, aided by his chosen mates, lifted Dick Morley from his feet, bearing him rapidly away. And the moment he disappeared from view, King Grizzly rose from his seat, passing an arm about the waist of the trembling, unnerved maiden, whose eyes were still hidden by her hands.

Strong hands fastened upon Fremont Metcalf, as though to anticipate any outburst of rage or vengeance; but he had no thoughts for himself, no eyes for aught save his poor sister, and he followed after King Grizzly as that worthy left the throne and supported his fair burden from the council hall.

As the chief passed him, Mountain Lion glanced up, as though he expected some kindly word, but as none came—as King Grizzly passed by without even a glance at the man who had met death in his defense—his head fell back and a cold cynical sneer curled his pale lips.

"I was an ass to think it!" he muttered, huskily, groping around for the half-emptied flask of liquor. "He'd use the bleeding heart of his own mother as a stepping-stone to the prize he sought to gain, and never feel it throb beneath his foot! If he should feel it, he'd curse it for not lying still!"

King Grizzly kept on with Dinorah until he gained the cell from which Mountain Lion had escorted her an hour before. He placed her upon the pallet, stepping aside to make room for Fremont Metcalf and his guards. He stood by in silence while the guards bound the hands of the young mine-owner behind his back, then knotted a small, pliable rope around his ankles as he sat with his back supported against the rock wall. Then a gesture caused the men to turn away and leave them alone together.

"Well, my dear fellow," the outlaw chief began, with a dry, hard laugh, "how do you like it as far as you've got? What do you think of the man whom your tools drove into the hills with rods and stripes? How do you like the breed that has come from those dragon teeth?"

Fremont Metcalf made no reply to these jeering taunts. He gazed steadily into the face of his enemy, and King Grizzly actually stared back with an involuntary curse. His glowing eyes looked so like those of Chispa Charley when the King of the Sports silently defied him and threatened vengeance at the same time. But the ruffian quickly rallied.

"You are sullen? You won't answer civil questions? Well, small loss to those who are fond of music! And I can do the talking for both, if I am compelled to."

With a devilish malignancy, King Grizzly suddenly seated himself on the pallet by the side of Dinorah, placing her form between himself and her brother. He passed an arm around her waist, drawing her close to his side, leaning over and pressing his vile lips to hers before she could divine or frustrate his purpose.

With a shuddering cry Dinorah strove to break away from his loathsome embrace, while Fremont struggled desperately to burst his bonds, to leap at the throat of the villain. And his main object gained—that of shaking Fremont from his enforced composure—King Grizzly leaped to his feet with a mocking laugh, standing once more before his captives.

"There's more ways than one of choking a cat, you see, my amiable brother-in-law! You locked up your tongue; I found the key. Lofty scorn is good enough in its proper time and place, but it won't go down with your humble servant—and master!"

"Say what you wish, then leave us alone," hoarsely uttered Fremont, desperately striving to regain his composure.

"As I have other work on hand, I'll do it, dear fellow. I can put it into a few words, since you appear disinclined for genial company. And here it is."

With that sentence, the voice and manner of the rascal changed abruptly. All trace of levity vanished. His voice was cold and hard. His face took on a cruel expression. His eyes glittered like those of an enraged serpent.

"By this time you should realize how utterly you are in my power. I need only lift my hand and you, Fremont Metcalf, would be killed at a blow, or else subjected to tortures more frightful than ever the brain of savage conceived. At a word from me, Dinorah Metcalf, you would fare a thousand-fold worse. You have seen my lambs. They are far from lovely outside, but under their grim masks they are even uglier. Think, then, what would be your fate were I to

bid them take you to do with as their mad fancies suggested!"

"Devil! fiend! if I ever get another chance at you!" bitterly grated Fremont, vainly striving to free his hands.

"You never will," was the cold retort. "If you ever go out from this place with life in your body, I will be far away and beyond your reach. There is no other traitor in the Menagerie. When the sun sets there will not be even that one."

"You will not—you dare not murder him!" gasped Dinorah, for the moment forgetting her own extremity in her fears for the strange being whom she began to believe was indeed the long-missing Tucker Metcalf.

"He has deserved death by breaking his solemn vows," was the cold reply. "By his disobedience and treachery, he has been the means of bloodshed, if not of death. You heard the doom pronounced upon him by the Family. And though only one word was pronounced by their lips, that one word comprised a volume that would put Fox's Martyrs to blush! That death means tortures beyond the power of human lips to describe. And Dick Morley—Tucker Metcalf, as he must be if he is your father—shall suffer all those tortures, unless you, Dinorah Metcalf, interfere to preserve him!"

"What can I do?" faltered Dinorah.

"Nothing—sister, be still!" impetuously cried Fremont. "As for Dick Morley, he's only the tool of a worse master, both of whom deserve worse tortures than human ingenuity can contrive. Bah! you poor, miserable idiot! Do you think to blind me? Don't I know that all this is but a silly scheme between you two scoundrels to—"

"Is there any trickery in the hurt of Mountain Lion?"

"That you could not foresee. The fellow deserved all he got, though it is a pity you did not fill his shoes just then. If a villain and a criminal, at least he was a brave one."

King Grizzly turned abruptly from him to his sister.

"Do you believe him an impostor, also?"

"I don't know what to believe," murmured the poor girl, bowing her head in her hands, her brain feeling as though it must burst. "When with him, I almost believe—when away, I am haunted by terrible doubts."

"Let it pass for the moment, and listen. You and your brother are wholly at my mercy. Only gold can save you from death, at the best. If the ransom is paid as I will direct, so much the better for all concerned. I depend mainly on you for bringing this about. If you turn stubborn, like your brother, I will have this Dick Morley—this Tucker Metcalf as he now declares himself—tortured before your very eyes!"

"One reason the less for clinging to life!" cried Fremont, with a hard laugh.

With a savage glance toward him, King Grizzly added:

"If that does not bring you to terms, I have still other means of persuasion."

"Lose little time in employing them, then, or Chispa Charley will bring worse than ruin about your ears!"

"If living, you mean!" with a sneer.

Dinorah impulsively caught him by the knees, her pale face turned imploringly upward, tears streaming from her eyes, her voice broken and barely coherent as she gasped:

"Tell me—he is not dead? You have not murdered him?"

"If still alive, be sure Chispa has tasted worse than death this past night. I hope he still lives—I have not made him suffer the tenth part of what he deserves. I will soon know how he passed the night. My spies will come back to report. As soon as they come you shall know. You shall be where you can hear their reports, never fear. Until then, take what comfort you can."

King Grizzly turned abruptly away, as though fearful of testing his strength further. The mention of Chispa Charley had affected him far more powerfully than aught else that had happened that night.

King Grizzly passed through the council hall, turning around a corner of the still standing throne, and entering a narrow passage there hidden. This led him to a medium-sized chamber which he had selected for his private quarters.

The apartment was occupied just at present, however. Dick Morley sat at the rude table, coolly smoking a pipe and drinking with Silver-tip, the giant. The other guards had been sent away, their services being no longer needed.

"You can go back to the boys, Silver-tip," shortly spoke the chief as he entered, and without a word the giant obeyed.

King Grizzly flung himself into a chair, taking a heavy drink from the bottle, then glared half-savagely, half-sullenly into the pale countenance of his companion. Then he growled:

"What the foul fiend have you been up to, anyway, Dick?"

"Obeying orders, your majesty," was the calm reply.

"Drop that infernal mummery, now we're alone together!" Walter Teemer said, with a

coarse oath. "I'm sick and tired of it already!"

"It hardly works as smoothly as it might."

"Who is to blame? How came you to commit such an infernal blunder? Or was it a blunder?" with a savage glare of suspicion. "Maybe you played it to win! Maybe you thought to get me out of the way, for your own good! If I thought so—"

"But you don't think so," was the quiet interposition.

King Grizzly calmed down as he took another drink. He was still out of sorts, but that wild suspicion was banished by the coolness of his tool.

"What made you give the hot-headed fool a pistol?"

"You bade me watch my chance and gain their confidence. That chance came sooner than either of us could expect, for Mountain Lion placed me on guard over the prisoners when he brought them here. With the chance before me, and your orders fresh in mind, what could I do but improve the opportunity?"

"That's not answering my question. Why arm them?"

"Because I saw that I would fail to win even a patient hearing without some such proof of my truth. If they would not listen, how was I to carry out your plans? Even then, that hot-headed boy scorned and reviled me—his own father!"

He laughed softly as he pronounced the last words, and King Grizzly joined him; though it was only half-heartedly.

"He took the tools, and used them, too! Curse him! For a moment I felt that my brainpan was drilled through and through. As it was, I nearly broke my arm and skull on the rocky floor!"

"It was rather a close shave."

"And Mountain Lion—poor devil!"

"It will be all the same, a thousand years from now. At least, he'll never live to pull hemp."

"And you—what do you think the boys'll say?" with a heartless grin as he watched his companion.

"What can they say, when you tell them that I was simply obeying your own orders?"

"I didn't tell you to supply them with arms?"

"But you said nothing to the contrary," was the calm retort. "You bade me spare no pains to gain their confidence. You wanted another hold on them, in case Chispa Charley should fail to come to time. By the way, what did you do with him?"

"Never you mind!"—shortly. "I've got something else to ask you. Did you write a note warning those three to be on their guard against me?"

He keenly watched the pale face of the man before him as he abruptly put this question, but he read only a calm surprise there. Not a trace of conscious guilt or of fear. And the voice was calm and steady which replied:

"I wrote no note. I don't understand what you mean."

"Some one did, and I could only think of you. I didn't know but what you fancied you could play the game single-handed, and keep all the stakes to yourself. I'm not quite sure, even yet. But look you, Dick Morley!" and he leaned across the rude table, his eyes glowing savagely, as he shook a finger in the face of his companion; "if you ever try to sell me out, you'll rue it to your last day—and that won't be long in coming! Mind that!"

With a cold smile the man brushed the quivering finger aside, his gaze steadily encountering the other.

"What could I gain, even were I the idiot you imagine! I could never convince the boy, even if I could the girl. I might be the original Tucker Metcalf—I might bring angels down from heaven to bear testimony to my truth—but he would never believe it. Knowing this as I do, would I be idiot enough to fly in your face, and thus lose all reward? Bah! it is bad whisky that puts such thoughts into your brain, Teemer. Banish them as quickly and as completely as possible. It's a heavy game you are playing, and you can't afford to lose a single aid. Poor and shiftless as Dick Morley is, even the loss of his help may make all the difference between winning and losing with you!"

If not convinced, King Grizzly was silenced. He knew that some one had played the traitor, and if Dick Morley was innocent, where was he to turn to find the guilty one? It was a bewildering puzzle, and his brain, thickened and befogged by lack of repose, by toil and difficult plotting, by fierce passions and heavy blows, refused to give him a clew.

"Let it go for now," he growled, with a prolonged yawn. "If you do your duty and obey orders, you'll get your share of the boodle when it is fairly won. If you are true to me, I'll see that you don't suffer for the accident which laid Mountain Lion out."

"You are very kind," with a low bow.

King Grizzly stared at him suspiciously, half believing him guilty of mockery. There was something new and uncomfortable in the manner of Dick Morley, of late. Could it be that he was indeed—Bah!

King Grizzly laughed at his own wild fancy, and flung his half-smoked cigar aside, rising and stretching his arms like one wholly overcome by fatigue and want of sleep.

"I'm going to take a nap. You'd better stay here until I wake up. The boys might handle you roughly, were you to go out among them, free and armed as you are. They don't know the bottom facts of our little plot, and it'll take some talk to smooth over the rough places."

While speaking, the outlaw was kicking over a bundle of blankets and robes which lay in one corner of the rock chamber. He dropped down upon them, adding:

"Silver-tip will bring word when Big Horn comes back to report. Until then, let me sleep. You understand?"

"Perfectly," was the quiet reply.

King Grizzly said no more, but stretched himself out on his rude pallet, and within five minutes afterward, his heavy, and regular breathing pronounced him soundly sleeping.

Dick Morley sat beside the table, his chin supported on his palms, his elbows resting on the table. He was slowly smoking, seemingly buried in deep thought. But as the sound of that heavy breathing came to him, a sudden and startling alteration came over him.

His eyes glittered vividly, his face darkened, his hands fumbled at his revolvers, while he hoarsely whispered:

"You devil! You can sleep—and with me watching you? Look out, Walter Teemer! If you only knew what the foul fiend your master, was whispering to me this minute!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BIG HORN MAKES HIS REPORT.

FREMONT METCALF sat in his cell, his knees supporting his elbows, his chin clasped between his palms, watching the pale and haggard face of his sister as she lay sleeping. His brows contracted heavily as low murmurs escaped her unconscious lips. He noted each flitting shade of terror that crossed the fair face of the sleeper, but he made no move to awaken her. Even such broken rest would do her good.

No one had entered their cell since King Grizzly took his departure. When he left his captives, Fremont Metcalf was bound firmly hand and foot. Now he was free, thanks to the persevering efforts of Dinorah.

Though there was apparently but little to be gained by having the use of his hands without weapons of some sort fill them, Fremont felt more like a man when they were at liberty, and King Grizzly had hardly left the cell before he had Dinorah at work unbinding his wrists.

"That foul fiend can't insult you while I have my hands, at any rate!" he muttered, almost savagely.

Hours had passed since then—how many, he had no means of knowing. Inside that cavern, daytime and night were all the same; he had no means of knowing whether the sun or the moon now reigned in the heavens.

His first duty, after King Grizzly had left them and his limbs were at liberty, was to soothe and compose his sister. Poor girl! She had suffered all but death. Her powers of both mind and body were exhausted, but her grief and fears were so great that it was only after long soothing and much pleading that Fremont prevailed on her to lie down and try to sleep.

He frowned painfully as he watched and listened.

"It's little rest her poor brain is getting!" he muttered beneath his breath as Dinorah stirred uneasily, faintly murmuring the name of Chispa Charley. "It will give her more strength—for what? To suffer more acutely! To live the longer in the merciless grip of that hell-hound! If I thought that, I could grip her throat with my own hands and never let go until her spirit reached heaven!"

For a brief space the half-crazed youth seemed about to put his wild threats into execution. He bent forward and hung over the form of the slumbering maiden. His hands slowly moved toward her exposed throat, and the fires of insanity seemed to leap into his bloodshot eyes. But only for a moment. Dinorah smiled—a wan, feeble smile as though a rift of light had shot across the dark clouds that infolded her even in slumber—and Fremont drew back with a short, gasping breath.

"Charley—thank Heaven! They said you were dead!"

With startling distinctness these words were pronounced by the maiden, and Fremont believed she had awakened. But then he saw his mistake. Dinorah was still slumbering; but now all seemed peace with her. A gentle smile played around her lips. Her breathing was regular. There were no more moans or painful starts. Both mind and body were at rest.

Yet Fremont Metcalf frowned deeper than before. He almost regretted this, for he began to believe that death alone could end her trials—that death alone could wrest her from the merciless grip of Walter Teemer.

"And this is her wedding-day!" he muttered, hoarsely.

How long he watched beside the sleeper, Fremont never knew. It seemed to him that his

vigil had never been interrupted, yet, when he suddenly opened his eyes and lifted his head with the echo of heavy footsteps still ringing in his ears, he saw Dinorah sitting beside him, one finger on her lips as though warning him to silence and caution. He found himself on the pallet, just as though he had changed places with Dinorah and had been sleeping soundly.

Before he could fairly comprehend this, a brighter light filled the stone chamber, and three men entered the prison.

The leader was the giant called Silver-tip. Black Wolf and Rattlesnake bore him company.

"Waal, critters, how d'ye think ye feel, anyhow?" grinned the big rascal as he swung the lantern so that its full rays fell upon the twain.

"Gittin' sorter peckish, ain't ye? Wouldn't turn yer stomachs ef a mule load o' chuck was drapped right down inter your laps, eh?"

Fremont rubbed one hand across his dimmed eyes, then demanded savagely:

"What do you want here?"

Silver-tip jumped back with a clumsy affectation of fear, ejaculating:

"Durned ef I don't b'lieve the p'izen critter'd bite!"

"He can strike, as none should know better than yourself, Romeo Bugg," sharply retorted Fremont, his brief bewilderment vanishing and giving place to his wonted boldness.

The giant started in reality, this time, and something very like a curse escaped his masked lips, for until now he believed his disguise impenetrable.

Fremont laughed, shortly, hardly.

"The head and hide of a burro would be more appropriate, Romeo. There's naught of the grizzly about you but the appetite and a terribly vile odor!"

"An' the len'th o' my claws—look out laddy-buck that you don't git the measure o' them jest when ye ain't thinkin'," viciously snarled the Hercules.

"From ambush and behind, then!" was the quick retort. "You haven't the sand to show them to a man, openly."

Dinorah, fearing for her rash brother, gently touched his arm. He was partially recalled to his senses by that action. He knew that he was helplessly at the mercy of these vile wretches, were they inclined to display their power, and for her sake he once more resolved to guard his hot temper.

"Jesting aside, what do you want of me, anyway?"

"Tain't me that wants you—it's the boss," growled the giant, his voice sulky and vicious.

"King Grizzly, as you call him?"

Silver-tip nodded.

"Well, he knows where to find me. Tell him to come here, if he has anything particular to say."

"He ain't that kind o' cat, jest now. He said fetch you two critters to him, an' we're goin' to 'bey orders. Nail him, lads!" growled Silver-tip, dropping his lantern.

Black Wolf and Rattlesnake were about to leap upon the young mine-owner, when Dinorah interposed, fearing the worst for Fremont.

"We will go with you quietly. Brother—for my sake!"

Her appeal acted like a charm. Fremont dropped his guard and quietly submitted. The outlaws took hold of him, but it was with, comparatively, mildness. And Silver-tip allowed Dinorah to walk untouched from the cell, himself leading the way.

They followed the same course and entered upon almost precisely the same scene as a few hours previously. The hall of council was brilliantly lighted up. The robe-covered throne was occupied by Walter Teemer, again wearing his grim mask as King Grizzly. The members forming the Rocky Mountain Menagerie were ranged around the foot of the throne, and as Silver-tip made his appearance at the head of the prisoners and their guards, they opened ranks and permitted him to advance almost to the foot of the throne.

"I done fetched 'em, boss," he announced, with a clumsy attempt at a bow. "The young feller hed got loose ag'in somehow, but I don't reckon he's got any other teeth then the law 'lows him."

At a motion from King Grizzly, Silver-tip fell back, taking his stand close behind Fremont Metcalf. Then "his majesty" addressed the young mine-owner:

"Fremont Metcalf, one word with you. I promised you that you should hear the first report delivered by my spy in town. He is in waiting, ready to report. Will you pledge me your sacred word of honor to—"

"I make no pledges to a cowardly villain such as you!"

King Grizzly lifted his right hand. Silver-tip caught the bold speaker by the wrists and deftly drew both arms behind his body, holding them thus despite the desperate struggles made by the captive, until Black Wolf snapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists. Then the giant relaxed his grip and fell back with Black Wolf, leaving Fremont and Dinorah alone inside the circle of masks.

"You have only yourself to blame for this harsh treatment, Fremont Metcalf," coldly ut-

tered King Grizzly. "I simply wished your pledge to offer no violence, to remain quiet and orderly while my spy was delivering his report. You refused; this is the result."

Dinorah, fearing worse, clung to the arm of her rash, hot-headed brother, begging him to control himself. And after one desperate effort to twist asunder the stout chain connecting the steel bracelets, Fremont yielded to her prayers.

That fierce, unreasoning temper had been his bane through life, but never before had it used him so mercilessly as ever since the first appearance of the Rocky Mountain Menagerie. It was one constant succession of mad outbursts, and each one ended in his being worsted.

King Grizzly made another signal, and two rude stools were brought forward and placed by the captives. Dinorah, her brain calmed, her body and mind strengthened by sleep, quietly led Fremont to one, sitting down beside him, her arm about his waist, as though she would thus keep him from harm.

For a brief space there was utter silence in the council hall. Then a peculiar whistle rung through the rock-chamber, followed a moment later by light footsteps. They came nearer and nearer, until a tall form entered the hall, advancing until at the foot of the throne, there bowing low, then standing erect, with arms folded across his chest.

Both Fremont and Dinorah looked at the newcomer curiously, for they felt that from his lips must come either life or death, so far as their hopes were concerned.

They each remembered that peculiar disguise; the huge, curving horns, the goat-like head and shaggy beard.

"Well, Big Horn?" impatiently cried King Grizzly. "What have you to report? How did it work? Speak out, can't you?"

Not a remarkably kingly address, but Walter Teemer was playing a desperate game for high stakes, and he may be pardoned for occasionally forgetting the character he had assumed.

"It couldn't work better, your majesty," was the quick response. "The hull thing's gone jest as you planned it."

"Good enough!" ejaculated King Grizzly, rubbing his hands together in huge glee. "And now, Big Horn, you can make your report in regular fashion, since you have set my mind at rest. Conceal nothing. Tell everything that can possibly interest these, our gentle guests. If we are rich in nothing more substantial, we have an abundance of time."

"Shell I go back to the beginnin'?" slowly asked the spy.

"Yes! back to the mcment when we separated Chispa Charley and his blushing bride," laughed King Grizzly. "Unless we paint the whole picture, there may some doubts linger in their minds. Tell all—hide nothing!"

In cold, steady tones, the spy obeyed. He concealed nothing. He spoke of the savage flogging which Chispa Charley was called upon to endure. He told how he was slung to a rope and painfully hauled across the water until his feet rested upon the black rock in the center of the waterfall. He told how he was left thus, battling for life against the savagely tugging flood; and then he told how the men of Canaan hastened to the rescue of their idol, to find him still living, still fighting against death.

His sentences were short and crisp. He wasted no words. His language was rough and uncouth, but he painted the picture so clearly that all who heard him could see each detail as clearly as though the reality was before them. And poor Dinorah trembled and moaned with horror as she listened.

The spy calmly went on to tell how the King of the Sports was rescued from his perilous situation, thanks to the skillful swimming of Donald McLean and the steady nerve of Dave Long, the Marshal of Canaan.

"You know, your majesty, an' you, lads," he inserted by way of parenthesis, "that I hain't got any too much love fer the law or them as keep the wheels o' the jestic mills in motion; but I was one o' the gang that seed the job done, an' when Dave Long come back to dry land, I felt like takin' off my hat to him—I jest did!"

"Never mind that!" impatiently interposed King Grizzly, clearly disliking this tribute to a heart of gold. "Stick to your story. Tell the plain facts, and never mind your thoughts. What did Chispa Charley say or do?"

"His fu'st words was when Dave Long swore to hunt down the critters as did the deed. He told Dave to hold his han'. The gang belonged to him, body an' soul! I reckon you kin read the meanin' o' that, better then I kin tell ye."

There was an uneasy stir among the Menagerie, and the grim masks turned one to the other after a very significant fashion. King Grizzly saw this, and a hoarse laugh broke forth.

"It means wind—just wind! Chispa has got good teeth, and can bite deep and hard, I'm not denying that; but just now he's muzzled so completely that a baby might tweak his nose and never risk the loss of a finger-tip! While we hold on to the apple of his eye, Chispa won't hurt anybody."

"I don't reckon you're fur out o' the way, your majesty," added the spy, quietly. "Fer a time I thought different last night. 'Memberin' how sharp the critter looked at each one o' us when we tuck turns with the ropes, I felt kinder crawly an' creepy all over when he looked my way. I was only one, an' him with a mighty ugly crowd at his back. Ef he was to spot me, an' say the word, I knowed salt wouldn't keep me from spilin' in a hurry!"

"But he didn't suspect you?"

"I reckon not, sense I'm here in one piece," dryly responded Big Horn.

"Then come down to what actually happened. Where did Chispa Charley go? What did he do? What did he tell the men of Canaan? Are any of them on the hunt for us?"

"Chispa jest said them words as I told you, then he drapped like a dead man. But it was only a fainty-spell. Dave Long soon brung him to enough fer him to say he wanted to be tuck straight back to Canaan.

"That was enough. Ef Chispa hed made a wish to go to the moon, I reckon the boys 'd 'a' manidged to git him thar. He was a little god on airth jest then—he was!"

"A litter was rigged up, an' Chispa kerried to town. He was toted up to his old room in the Occidental, an' the crowd was shet out by Dave Long. Of course I was one o' the gang, but I kept my eyes open an' never lost a p'int in the game.

"The hull town was up on their ears, an' only waited fer a single hint to set off wild fer skelps. They begged Dave Long to git 'em that hint, an' he said he'd do all he could. He was one o' the hottest himself. But he couldn't make it out. Chispa locked his jaws, an' said it was his own game. Ef he couldn't play it alone, it might play itself.

"This was too mild to suit the crowd, an' what with the free drinks at The Grave, the hot talk of them as swore Chispa must hav big pay fer his troubles, an' the nat'ral cussedness o' human natur', they was a gang got up to take a scout over the kentry on gineral results, when Chispa came outside an' called them to order."

"You are sure? He was able to walk—to address the men of Canaan, so soon after his rescue?" savagely growled Teemer.

"I see'd him with my own eyes, an' hearn him with my two ears," quietly replied the spy. "He looked white as a sheet, an' he hed to grip Dave Long by one arm, but he talked plenty strong fer all to hear an' understan' him."

"Well, what did he have to say?" impatiently.

"Not many words, but they hed a heap o' strong meat into 'em. He said that the boys was to simmer down an' keep tha'r fingers out o' the pie. That the more noise they was made, the wuss it'd be fer the Metcalfs. Any effort to find them, would lead to tha'r massacre, sure an' sart'in! He axed the boys to hold back tha'r han's an' not make a move without his takin' the lead. Ef they wouldn't listen to his coaxin', then let 'em hear his threats. An' he spit 'em right out, too! He swore by heaven an' by airth that he'd kill the fu'st man as made a row over the matter without his permission. Ef one 'zample wa'n't enough he'd make a slaughter-house o' both Canaan an' Tinker's Dam. The young leddy shouldn't be hurt through them, anyway!"

"How did the crowd take that?" asked King Grizzly.

"Like lambs. After all, it was his pie. Ef he said hands off, they was willin'."

King Grizzly shook his head, dubiously. Big Horn laughed softly, as he added:

"I thought it sounded a little too quiet, my own self; or you wouldn't 'a' hed to wait so long fer my report. I kept a close watch, an' I soon diskivered that Chispa hed sent off two men to the highest stations whar they could telegraph, an' it didn't take many hints afore I hed a few o' the boys red-hot to interview Dave Long on that p'int.

"They ketched him 'long 'bout noon, an' he pumped free enough. It was true. Chispa hed sent word to the comp'ny as wanted to buy out the property, to come down with the ducats in a holy hurry, or he'd 'clar the barg'in off fer good.

"Dave said that Chispa hed come to the 'clution that the only way to git the critters out o' your grip alive, was to pay over the cash. Then—waal, Dave didn't say much, but his eyes talked a hull bookful, the boys said. An' they read it so easy that they went off right away an' began to git ready fer red-hot fun when the clock struck."

"And Chispa Charley?"

"Tuck to his bed after that talk with the boys. They say he's a mighty sick man—all broken up! I hung around thar ontel dark to make sure he wasn't playin' no gum game. I hearn Dave Long give Chispa's last orders, then I come off to report. They was fer the boys to wait. That any stir they made would be all the wuss fer the prisoners. Any 'tempt to find 'em would make thar lives the forfeit."

Until now Fremont Metcalf had listened in silence, but as Big Horn concluded his report, he leaped to his feet, his eyes aglow, his voice ringing out sharp and full of angry scorn:

"It is a lie—a lie from beginning to end!"

Chispa is a man, not a bloodless coward! He'd rather see us die than to cringe and make terms with such dastardly wretches as you!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

KING GRIZZLY SURPRISED.

KING GRIZZLY raised his hand, and instantly Silver-tip fastened his mighty grip on the shoulders of the excited man, muttering roughly in his ear:

"Hold yer yawp, critter, or I'll shet my grip onto ye tell the bug-juice runs out at every sweat-hole—'deed I will!"

Fremont Metcalf made no resistance, but if Romeo Bugg flattered himself that it was through fear of him, he shot wide of the mark. Fremont felt the trembling clasp of Dinorah's hand and saw that she was well-nigh swooning. He forgot himself, and only remembered her.

"Water, some of you infernal scoundrels—bring water!" he cried, dropping on one knee the better to support the poor girl, since his arms were useless.

King Grizzly started from his throne, but Dinorah, seeing this, desperately fought back the dizzy sensation, gasping:

"I am better—I am well—don't let him touch me!"

No need to mention names. The manner in which she shrunk away from the masked chief, the shudder which crept over her frame as she averted her eyes, spoke plainer than words. And toughened though his hide must have become, Walter Teemer could not entirely hide his rage and chagrin, aided though he was by his hairy mask.

He paused, reseated himself, only to rise again and descend from his throne; but he did not offer to touch Dinorah with his own hands, just then. Instead, he spoke sharply:

"Silver-tip, take the gentleman back to his quarters!"

"Not without her—not without my sister!" hoarsely uttered Fremont, his face paling, the veins swelling on his temples as he glared bitter defiance into the face of his enemy.

King Grizzly laughed carelessly, then replied: "Of course not, unless the lady prefers other company. If so, she has only to mention her choice to have it gratified."

Dinorah clung to Fremont, moving toward the passage that led back to their cell. Silver-tip checked them, glancing toward the chief for instructions. King Grizzly nodded, and the grip of the giant dropped away. Another sign, and he caught up the lantern with which he had lighted them to the council hall, and bearing this he took the lead.

King Grizzly paused long enough to whisper a few words to Big Horn, then he followed after, entering the cell close at the heels of his prisoners.

There was a fresh supply of food and drink on a tray beneath the hanging lantern, but neither Fremont nor Dinorah thought of appeasing hunger or thirst, after what they had heard. They only wished to be left alone together, that they might think it all over, that they might solve their doubts by consultation, by sifting the strange report made by Big Horn.

Fremont turned upon King Grizzly, and growled sharply:

"You can have nothing more to say to us, so get out. Your presence makes the air unfit for honest people to breathe. Is that hint sharp enough to pierce your thick hide, or shall I drive it through with a kick?"

"Playful, isn't he, Silver-tip?" laughed his majesty, with a glance at the giant.

"So durned playful, I reckon he feels the want of a keeper to tone him down jes' a trifle. An' boss, you don't know how mighty cheap I'd take the persish, ef you'd on'y say so!"

He spoke with a short laugh, but underneath the clumsy playfulness, was hidden an intense malignance and bitter hatred. Romeo Bugg had not yet forgotten the punishment dealt out to him by Fremont that night at The Grave.

"It may come to that, Silver-tip, but not just this minute," replied King Grizzly. "If it should, be sure I'll not pass you by. I think you would be an admirable tamer."

"Jes' try me—jes' try me, boss," growled the ruffian.

"You have my promise. For the present, you can leave him in my care," added King Grizzly, with a gesture that Silver-tip accepted as an order to take himself off.

During this little by-play, the brother and sister had seated themselves on the pallet, Fremont placing himself in such a position that King Grizzly would have to pass over him before he could lay hands on Dinorah. And as the chief turned once more toward them a harsh laugh broke from his lips as he rightly interpreted this move.

"That wouldn't save the dainty darling, my dear fellow, if I felt in a love-making mood this evening—which I don't," he uttered, coarsely, his fingers busy with the fastenings which kept his ugly mask in place.

He removed the grim disguise, casting it carelessly aside, as he spoke again:

"It has about served its turn. A few more days, and King Grizzly will be known never

more in these, his stamping-grounds. A few more days, and—"

"The hangman's rope will jerk his body higher than ever his spirit will mount!" snapped Fremont, showing his teeth.

Dinorah clung closer to him. She breathed a soft warning in his ear, for she feared his hot temper and caustic tongue would still further embitter Walter Teemer, and perhaps drive him to still worse treatment.

But in this case her fears seemed without foundation. The chief brute of the Menagerie seemed in an unusually happy mood for him. He laughed at the cut, instead of snarling.

"Use your tongue while you may, dear fellow! It will not be for long. The game is pretty near its end, and as I hold all the trumps I can afford to grant you that little pleasure. And all you can say will not make your doom any the heavier."

Dinorah shuddered as she heard those words and marked the look of devilish triumph which came into the eyes and face of the desperado. Almost unconsciously she cried:

"But you said we might go free, safe and sound—"

"And when I said that, it was *all* sound, my precious!" the villain interposed, with a hard, malicious laugh. "In other words, wind—guff—lies; take your choice, pretty!"

Even Fremont felt a cold thrill creeping over his frame as he listened to the exulting, mocking scoundrel. Until now he had never doubted but that Walter Teemer would keep his part of the bargain, were the ransom money demanded duly delivered. But now he could not help doubting. And his heart sunk, heavy as lead, as he thought of the fate before Dinorah if that demon really meant such black treachery.

King Grizzly laughed mockingly as he read these thoughts and fears in the working features of his captives. He squatted down before them, plainly intending to enjoy a feast after his own heart.

"You took me for one of the common truck, didn't you, my darlings? You fancied I would be content to take back what rightfully belonged to me, and call it square? You fancied I would forget to count up the stripes I suffered through you? That I would simply take my own, then shake hands and bid you good-by and God-speed? Bah! how little you knew me!"

"You gave your word," faltered Dinorah.

"I am a thief, a robber, an outlaw—my back is scarred like that of a horse-thief or a runaway slave—yet you think I am one to be bound by a mere breath?" sneered the villain, showing his teeth viciously. "If so, you don't know me yet! You will, before the final parting comes, my precious!"

There was a brief silence. Fremont leaned toward his agitated sister, caressing her with his cheek since his hands were powerless. King Grizzly seemed struggling with himself, fighting against the fierce passions which the memory of the black past had stirred up to a dangerous pitch. He conquered, to all seeming, for when he spoke again, his voice was even and steady.

"No, I don't think either of you ever fairly understood me. I doubt if I even knew myself, until my eyes were opened by the whips of the men of Canaan. But once opened, they will never again be blinded by such bosh as truth, honesty, faith.

"While I was nursing back my strength—for the honest men of Canaan wrote their names broad and deep!—I studied out my revenge. The stakes were well worth playing for, taking the gold alone into consideration; but I doubt if I would have taken so much trouble had gold alone beckoned me on. I could have made an equal sum in less time by following out the old programme, of waylaying the treasure-bearing coaches. What spurred me on the most keenly, was the thirst for revenge on each and every one of those who had taken a hand in my downfall. The most prominent ones were you two and Chispa Charley.

"Chispa, I have given one dose, as the first installment, and the dog has broken down beneath it. He escaped death, but his boasted nerve, his courage, his sand, all left him. He is a wreck, and has had enough of it this early in the game!"

"You lie, Walter Teemer!" hotly cried Fremont, unable to remain quiet while his bosom friend was slandered, as he felt. "Chispa Charley will prove himself more than a match for you and your whole gang of cowardly cut-throats!"

"Hug that belief to your bosom, if it gives you any comfort, my dear fellow," laughed the rascal. "You heard the report made by my spy. You have seen the black rock in the middle of the fall. You can imagine how pleasantly Chispa Charley passed those hours, his hands bound behind him, the loose ropes tugging at him, the—"

A heart-sick moan from Dinorah cut him short. He laughed with satanic glee, rubbing his hands together. As he squatted there in the dim light, he looked more the demon than a man.

"Never heed the lying cur, pet," muttered Fremont, hoarsely, vainly striving to twist asunder the chain that united his wrists behind him. "Chispa is all right. Chispa will come to our assistance in good time, never fear!"

"It is you who are lying now, my son," laughed King Grizzly. "In your own heart you know that Chispa has given up the game, and decided to pay over to me the stakes—that is, the stakes which he fancies are all that depends on the game. He will hurry up the company all he can, and pay the money over to me, then receive—what? His bride, if he chooses to accept what there is left of her!"

The words were not much, taken by themselves; but accompanied by that coarse laugh, that satanic leer, they cut to the very quick, and maddened beyond all endurance, Fremont Metcalf leaped to his feet and flung himself headforemost upon the scoundrel, his strong teeth gnashing savagely as they sought to fasten themselves upon the villain's throat.

But the handicap was too great. With a mocking laugh, King Grizzly avoided the assault, using foot and fist as he did so, and Fremont fell heavily upon the rock floor, stunned, almost deprived of sensibility.

King Grizzly sprung upon him, standing on his chest with one foot, the other lifted and quivering over the exposed face as though about to descend and crush it from all semblance to humanity.

"You poor fool!" he grated, savagely, as he tapped the bruised and bleeding lips with his sole, then stepping to the floor. "Would you measure your strength against mine? Haven't you learned the lesson yet? Must I kill you before I can drive any sense into your thick skull?"

Dinorah sprung to his side, looking into his face, but her arms and person shielding Fremont from further injury. She was unable to speak, but her attitude, her eyes were eloquent enough, and not difficult to comprehend. And King Grizzly for a moment seemed actually abashed!

But this did not last long. Fremont was not quite stunned to unconsciousness, and feebly lifted his upper body, glaring with unquelled hatred at his enemy as he gasped:

"Devil! ten thousand devils rolled into one!"

King Grizzly laughed shortly, his white teeth gleaming, his lips drawn back like those of an angry wild beast.

"Ah! I am a devil—but who made me one? You—you and yours, Fremont Metcalf! A devil I am, and I glory in the fact! A devil I am, and you shall bear witness to that fact before I am through with you!"

"And you—silly fools! Did you think that gold alone could satisfy me? Did you think I would be content with simply recovering my own? That I would take it and set you free to live and love and enjoy life as honest, pious guide-boards to lead such miserable devils as I to repentance? Bah!"

"Come! get back to your couch, my darlings. I have not showed you all my hand, as yet, and I want to get it over with while I am in the humor. Shall I assist you, dear fellow?"

Fremont slowly, painfully rose to his feet and returned to the rude pallet, leaning heavily upon Dinorah. The fall had been a heavy one. The iron fist of the outlaw had taken him on the neck just below his ear, at the same instant the nimble foot tripped him up, and his senses were still confused, his bodily powers scattered. He knew that he could offer no fitting resistance, and fearing the worst for Dinorah, he smothered his rage and silently obeyed, bidding his time.

Once more King Grizzly squatted before them. Once more he spoke, his voice hard and merciless, a vicious glitter in his eyes.

"Though the money was not my prime object, it was not to be sneezed at. I took pains to make the road clear to it, and then I struck my first blow. I brought you here. I gave Chispa a taste of my quality that will not be forgotten by him while he draws the breath of life!"

"You heard what my spy reported. The money will be paid. Chispa will make no move until then, for fear of worse coming to his dainty bride-elect. And when that money is paid—when it is fairly in my grasp—I will laugh at the poor, credulous fool! I will get him into my clutches once more, and see that he never escapes to tell the tale of what happens to his loved ones."

"What will that be? First, Fremont Metcalf, I will put you to the same torture the men of Canaan employed in my case. When you can endure no more, I will end it and your life at the same time. Then—before the eyes of Chispa Charley—I will turn to you, dainty, fastidious Miss Dinorah! I will exact pay from you for all I have suffered—will make you pay for my stripes, my insults, my pains—for my murdered father as well! And all this before the eyes of Chispa Charley, the man whom you thought would be, ere this, your husband!"

"And to prove my sincerity—I will take the first installment now and here!" he grated, viciously, as he leaped forward and tore the trembling maiden from the side of her brother, pressing her to his bosom and laughing like some hideous satyr, while his brutal lips were poised above hers!

But they never touched them. A dark form dashed into the cell and struck the brutal vil-

lain a heavy blow on the back of the head with a clubbed revolver. Strong arms caught Dinorah from his grasp, while a heavy foot spurned him away. And with a gasping, gurgling curse, King Grizzly fell in a heap near the further wall.

Fremont, dizzy, still weak, tried to gain his feet, but before he could do so, the villain was worsted, and he sunk back with a low cry of bewildered wonder as he recognized the long curved horns, the shaggy mask of Big Horn!

And Dinorah—how did she know? How could she penetrate that cunning disguise? Yet penetrate it she did, for with a glad cry, her arms joined around the neck of Big Horn, and her lips formed the words:

"Charley! I knew you would come to me!"

And as the grim mask was torn from its fastenings and cast aside, the manly face of Chispa Charley was revealed!

A wondering cry broke from Fremont, as he staggered to his feet. And like an echo came another ejaculation, coupled with a savage curse of deadly hatred and boiling rage! King Grizzly also recognized that honest countenance, and already a revolver filled his hand.

Quick as thought Chispa Charley flung Dinorah aside, but before he could do more, before he could draw a weapon or leap upon the head-headed outlaw, King Grizzly pulled trigger!

The King of Sports perceptibly staggered, but instantly recovered himself, leaping clear of the floor and striking the partially disabled villain with his feet, crushing him helplessly to the floor, driving the smoking pistol from his hand. A knife flashed brightly in his hand, and he stooped over King Grizzly as though to send the steel home; but he stayed his hand. The outlaw was beyond the power of further mischief, for the present, at least.

"They've heard the shot—they're coming, Chispa!" cried Fremont, hoarsely, vainly striving to burst the chain that held him helpless just when his full powers would be the most valuable.

"The whole gang is coming!"

He was right enough. Even as he leaped upon his enemy, the keen ear of Chispa Charley told him the alarm had reached the Menagerie. And now he could hear their loud cries, their heavy footsteps as they rushed toward the cell.

"Look to him—throw yourself upon him and hold him down, if he should come to," hurriedly uttered Chispa, as he darted to where the lantern hung and carried it further into the passage.

He came rapidly back, and lifting Dinorah in his arms, bore her over to the most protected corner, whispering as his lips touched hers:

"For my sake, darling, stay here. If I see you in peril, it would unman me, and then we would all be lost."

He had time for no more. The rush of the Menagerie came nearer, and already he could see the growing light of the lanterns and candles they had caught up in their surprise. And with a revolver in each hand, his face pale, but stern as fate, he awaited their coming.

Not for long. They could not have suspected who was waiting their appearance, else the boldest among them all would have faltered. They evidently fancied that their chief had gotten into trouble with the hot-tempered prisoner, for the bellowing tones of Silver-tip came through the narrow passage:

"We're comin', boss! Hold your grip! Yar we is—oh!"

He rounded the turn, but he came no further. He may have caught a glimpse of a bright flash—may have recognized that pale, stern face—but he did no more. He fell in a heap, with a bit of lead boring its way through mask, skull and brain!

And over him tumbled Rattlesnake and Black Wolf, so nearly at the same instant that their souls left their bodies simultaneously. And then—swifter than the tongue could have numbered the reports, those terrible weapons spoke on! And the rearmost outlaws gave vent to yells of terror as they dropped their lights and fled in hot haste, leaving they knew not how many of their mates dead and dying behind them!

CHAPTER XIX.

CHISPA CHARLEY STRIKES HOME.

THE report made to King Grizzly in the presence of his assembled Menagerie by the counterfeit spy, differed but very slightly from that which would have been delivered by the simon-pure Big Horn, but for certain events which that worthy rascal proved unable to guard himself against.

It was true that Chispa Charley was carried to Canaan by his rescuers, more like a corpse than a living man. He had suffered enough to kill a dozen men, and it is little wonder that even his wonderful nerve should falter and sink under the frightful strain, now that the sternest necessity for holding out was removed. And more like a dead man than a living, Chispa Charley was borne into the Occidental Hotel and up to the chamber where Jay Flicker had met his death.

But then, when only Dave Long and the doctor remained in the room, that deathlike stupor

was suddenly broken and Chispa Charley sprung into life and energy.

"Dave, see that no one comes near enough to get an inkling of the truth. Doctor, patch me up—give me strength for work, even if I have to pay a tenfold penalty hereafter!"

It was not delirium, as the two astonished men fancied, at first. It was pure grit, and Chispa Charley speedily convinced them that he was sound in mind, if not in body.

The doctor was bound to strict secrecy, and made the best possible use of his drugs. Dave Long was carefully tutored in the part he was to play, and like the honest, true heart of gold, he really was, he cast aside his own wishes, his own judgment as to the proper course to follow, and took the path Chispa Charley marked out for him.

There is no need of our giving in detail the events that immediately followed the rescue of Chispa Charley by the men of Canaan. The report he gave King Grizzly, as the original Big Horn, was true as far as it went. Chispa Charley played the part of a feeble, broken-down sufferer, whose only aim, was to win the safety of his bride-elect and her brother by paying over to the kidnappers the heavy ransom demanded. It was true that he sent off couriers for the nearest points where a telegram might be sent East to the company with whom he was bargaining for the Teemer property; true that he warned the indignant citizens against making any effort to discover the authors of the outrage, or rescue their victims, lest they be sacrificed by the merciless demons; true that he kept his room; but not true as to his utter prostration. On the contrary, Chispa Charley was thoroughly alive and working.

While held captive, he had recognized Romeo Bugg as the giant called Silver-tip; and with this clew as a guide, he believed he could name the largest portion of the masked band.

"Do you reckon 'Gene Dibble was any one of 'em?" eagerly interposed the marshal, his eyes glowing vividly.

"Just what I was getting at," quietly responded Chispa.

He said that he felt sure one of the gang was Eugene Dibble, who had, in the past, been more or less intimate with Romeo Bugg and his gang of roughs, but who had, since the downfall of Colonel Darius Teemer and his "heelers," been living a quiet and apparently honest life.

"He was one of the crowd that rid with me to help you," commented Dave Long. "Yit it may be, fer all that!"

"I pledge my reputation on it," quickly replied Chispa.

"Then it's so. What shall I do with the critter?"

"Nail him fast, and keep him safe until I can get a word with him. If one of the gang, he has been left here to keep them posted as to our movements. If he can, he's got to tell all about the outfit. Arrest him the moment you can without letting any other know of the move. You understand?"

Dave Long nodded gravely, then left the room and hotel.

He performed his work admirably, and Eugene Dibble, *alias* Big Horn, found himself placed under arrest just when he was on the point of leaving Canaan to carry his report to King Grizzly. He was stowed away in the small log cabin used by Dave Long, as his bachelor lodgings, without a soul in Canaan so much as suspecting the action. And there Chispa Charley found him as the shades of evening began to lower.

Not knowing but that Walter Teemer had a number of spies lurking around, Chispa Charley thoroughly disguised himself before leaving the Occidental Hotel. Even then he stole out the back way, more like a thief of the night than an honest man.

With doors locked and window muffled with a thick blanket, Dave Long lit a candle and placed it on the table between Chispa Charley and Eugene Dibble. He stood back with arms folded, silent and watchful.

The prisoner—for Dibble's arms were secured behind him by a pair of handcuffs—was sullen and dogged. Chispa was cold and merciless, showing not the faintest sign of the frightful tortures he had so recently undergone, unless, indeed, it was in the almost ghastly pallor of his face.

"It's no use trying to deny facts, Dibble," he was saying. "I recognized your voice as one of that vile gang. I can take oath that your eyes were one pair of those into which I looked while I was being lashed. I swore then that I would kill each and every one who took a hand in that pleasant little game, and I meant it, too! But I will make an exception in your case, if you will prove half-way reasonable."

"I wasn't there," sullenly muttered the prisoner. "You can't prove it. Fer all ye say, I'll never own up to a lie!"

"You will tell the truth, Dibble," coldly retorted Chispa Charley, one white finger tapping the table as though to emphasize the observation. "If you try lying, you will be the worst sufferer. What we want is the simple truth."

"You've got it, then, as fur's I kin give it."

Eff you was to keep on axin' ontel the crack o' doom I couldn't say no different then that. I never was one o' the gang. I never helped to take you over to the falls. I never tetched you with a stick or rope. But I *did* do all I knowed how to git you out o' the scrape—an' I call on Dave Long to witness it!"

"Don't call on Dave Long fer anythin', 'Gene; I'm only a deck-hand in this a'fa'r," quietly uttered the marshal.

Cold and sterner than ever, Chispa Charley rose to his feet, but his eyes fairly blazed as he added:

"You are proving yourself a bigger fool than you ever were villain, Eugene Dibble! A dozen words of truth from your lips would not only save two of my friends from worse than assassins, but give yourself liberty and immunity for your share in this dastardly plot. You refuse to utter them—now you shall speak out, you shall tell the whole truth, and that without any pledges being given by us."

His sinewy fingers closed on the villain's throat so swiftly and surely that not a cry could escape him. And with the practiced aid of Dave Long, Eugene Dibble was gagged beyond the power of uttering an articulate sound, much less an alarm sufficiently loud to rouse the town.

"A final word with you before the band begins to play, Dibble," said Chispa, quietly, his burning gaze holding the frightened yet sullen eyes of the prisoner. "I don't mean to kill you, if I can help it. I will protract the torture as long as I possibly can, while making it more and more acute as the minutes roll by. If you don't weaken in the first hour, I will watch for the sign of submission in the second, the third, fourth—I will watch for it until it is made, if that is postponed for a week or a month! Make it you shall! Tell the whole truth you must, if I have to spot every square inch of your hide with the tips of burning matches!"

Dave Long was busy while Chispa Charley spoke, and then he came forward and held a triangle of slip-nooses over the head of the ruffian, formed of small but strong whipcord. One of these he drew tightly around the long beard; the other two he secured around his ears, drawing each one so tightly that Dibble flinched with pain.

"When you are ready to make a clean breast of it, you have only to close your right eye, holding the other open," added Chispa Charley, as Dave Long fastened a *riata* to the middle of the triple noose, then flung the free end over one of the stout rafters overhead. "But mind you: don't make the sign until you are prepared to reveal all the secrets of the gang headed by Walter Teemer. If you do, in hopes of gaining a respite, I swear to make you suffer tenfold!"

Chispa drew back a little, taking the table with him. Dave Long straightened out the *riata*, and Eugene Dibble, with a shiver of pain, suddenly rose to his utmost height. But that did not save him. Dave Long kept the rope taut, and pulling steadily on it, fairly lifted the wretch clear of the floor.

The thin cords cut into the roots of his ears and seemed about to drag his beard out by the roots. The torture must have been excruciating, and Eugene Dibble shivered all over, writhing, twisting, striving to free his hands, to shriek aloud in his agony—but all in vain. His tormentors had performed their parts too thoroughly for that.

"Remember the signal, Eugene Dibble!" sternly uttered Chispa Charley, keenly watching the pain-distorted face of the one whom he believed alone able to give him the all-important information. "When you are ready to tell the whole truth, you know—Ha! let him down, Dave! He yields!"

Chispa was right. Less than one minute of that exquisite torture was sufficient to break down the nerve of the outlaw, and to save himself, he was ready to betray his comrades.

Dave Long promptly obeyed, and the feet of the prisoner had hardly touched the floor before the keen knife of the city marshal freed him from the slip-nooses and gag. And as Dibble sunk into the chair again, Chispa Charley said sternly:

"Bear in mind the warning I gave you! You must tell all, without reserve, or the worse for you!"

"I'll tell—I'd rather go to Hades at once then to stan' another minnit o' sech tortur'!" huskily uttered Dibble.

There is no particular necessity for recording each question and answer as they were made and given, since quite sufficient has been explained in the course of this story to give the reader a fair idea of the working and formation of the Rocky Mountain Menagerie. Enough that Dibble concealed nothing, answering the questions put him promptly and with perfect truth.

He told the names of the entire band, and gave each one the disguise and title used when the Menagerie was at work.

Among them he named Romeo Bugg, or Silver-tip; Red Fox, or Dick Morley; Black Wolf, Rattlesnake, and others who had long been known as parts of the gang headed by Romeo Bugg.

He told precisely where the rendezvous was located and offered to guide a force to the spot. He explained the manner of scaling the cliff. He repeated each signal, password, grip, and all the rest of the precautions taken by the outlaws to insure themselves against traitors or spies, ending by swearing to the perfect truth of his confessions.

"If not—if you have lied or thought to lay a trap for us—so much the worse for you!" coldly commented Chispa.

He drew Dave Long into a corner, whispering hurriedly, earnestly. Dave nodded, then left the cabin. Chispa turned to Dibble, saying:

"We are about to test the truth of your story. You are going with us. One man will keep beside you, his only duty being to see that you do not escape, that you are held for punishment or reward, according to how matters turn out."

"You'll find 'em jest as I said, boss."

"So much the better for you! If not—what you suffered in that one short minute, will seem like heavenly bliss to the punishment your treachery shall receive!"

Less than an hour after dusk, a score and a half of well-armed men were stealing out of Canaan by nearly as many different routes, but with the same rendezvous in view. They were the aides selected by Dave Long after that confession by Eugene Dibble, and their ultimate destination was the rock cavern of the Rocky Mountain Menagerie.

They met Chispa Charley and Dibble at the rendezvous, and with little waste of time they set out at a round trot for the Den.

They did not spare horseflesh. There was too much at stake for that. Whenever the nature of the ground permitted it, the animals were spurred to a gallop, and rapidly the miles were left behind them.

There was only one halt made, and that when they had almost reached the end of their journey. Eugene Dibble pointed out the spot where he had hidden his disguise, and dismounting with him, Chispa Charley changed clothes and covered his face with the mask of the big horn. And when next they drew rein, it was to hide their panting horses and steal on to the foot of the cliff containing the Den of the Menagerie.

"You understand, Dave?" hurriedly whispered Chispa. "When I have delivered my report and found out how the ground lies, I will come out and dispose of the guards, if any are stationed on the ledge up yonder. I'll lower the rope, and haul up a couple of you. That done, the game is in our own hands."

"Ef you'd on'y let me play the fu'st part, Chispa!" muttered the marshal anxiously. "You've went through so much a'ready, I'm afeard you won't hold out. Better let me go."

But Chispa Charley shook his head silently, then uttered the signal as given him by Dibble. A moment of breathless suspense, then all hearts gave a mighty bound of relief as the answer came from the cliff above. And a moment later the rope was seen noiselessly descending the rocks.

And with greater fears than they would have felt had they been making the venture themselves, Dave Long and his men watched Chispa rapidly rising up the face of the cliff, then suddenly disappear from sight. Breathlessly they listened, expecting no less than to hear the death-cry of their loved leader as his disguise was penetrated; but it came not.

It was terribly trying to those who waited and watched. Each minute seemed an hour. But when the alarm was given—when they heard the faint, muffled report of a revolver coming from the heart of the rocks—when they heard the wild outcry from the throats of the outlaws above—it was worse than torture. And Dave Long leaped upon Eugene Dibble, grating:

"You've sold him out, cuss ye! You've sent him to his death by givin' him false directions! But you'll never live to boast of it! I'll tear your heart out an' shove it down your throat!" "No—I swear—don't murder me!" Dibble managed to gasp. "Save—for torture—if Chispa's gone!"

It was a curious plea, but it saved him for the present. Dave flung him to his guard, saying hoarsely:

"Take him to the hosses. Hold him safe, or I'll kill you in his place! Git! An' you, boys, 'll come—"

"Look!" muttered one of the men. "The rope's comin'!"

He spoke the truth! The rope was rapidly descending the face of the cliff, though the uproar inside was wilder than ever, the reports of firearms coming in a prolonged roll. But Dave Long did not stop to ask himself how this came about. The moment the basket came within reach of his long arms, he caught the rope and went swiftly up, hand over hand, while two of his mates grasped the basket just as it began to ascend.

Dave Long dexterously swung himself into the rock ledge as he came up level with it. He saw a single man was working the windlass, and sprung to aid him, though he felt a dull surprise

as he recognized the mask of a huge fox covering the head of the worker.

"I'm a friend," gasped the mask, breathlessly. "I'm their father—Tucker Metcalf! Work! for their sake!"

Ten seconds later, the basket arrived, and the two men leaped out upon the ledge, and Red Fox once more sent the rope down, his teeth fairly chattering with intense excitement and anxiety as he said, noting the abrupt cessation of firing:

"You go—I can work it—help them, for the love of Heaven! Help them—my poor children!"

The firing had ceased, but the wild yells, oaths and shouts of the outlaws sounded clearer and nearer. Dave Long feared the worst for his friend, but there was no time to mourn for him then. He snatched his revolvers from his belt, motioned the two men to follow him, then dashed swiftly into the narrow passage and leaped into the rock chamber just as the demoralized outlaws rushed into it from the opposite side.

The room was sufficiently lighted to make it easy work for a practiced hand with the pistols, and Dave Long felt that he would be safe in shooting at any one who did not wear the head and horns of a mountain sheep.

"Give it to them, lads!" he howled, his weapons punctuating his words with deadly precision. "Down with 'em! No quarter! Strike fer Chispa! Don't let a durned one slip ye!"

The rascals were taken utterly by surprise and hardly struck a blow in self-defense. They found themselves taken between two fires. They had not recognized Chispa Charley, or taken time to see that only one man opposed them there. They fled in dismay, only to be confronted by a still worse peril. And then, as two more armed men rushed in from the outside, they gave up all hope, believing themselves surprised by an army, and dropping their weapons they begged wildly for mercy.

It was granted, as soon as they could make themselves understood; but already full one-half of their number had fallen, dead or mortally wounded, so rapidly, so truly had Dave Long and his men worked their tools.

"Spare all who holler 'nough!" cried Dave, leaping forward and grasping one of the fear-stricken wretches. "Kill all who try to kick, but spar' the rest! An' you, cuss ye!" shaking his captive as a mastiff might shake a terrier, "tell me whar is Chispa? Ef you've killed him, I'll make mincemeat o' the hull ongodly kit an' boodle!"

The terrified wretch was spared the necessity of a reply by Chispa Charley himself. He came rushing forth from the narrow passage, an outlaw held powerless in each hand, shouting:

"Good boys! It's a clean sweep for our side!"

"Thank the Lord you're here to say it, pard!" cried Dave Long, grasping his hand as he dropped the prisoners. "When I hearn the row, I thought it was all day with you! An' the little lady? You found her? She's all right?"

"Safe and sound, Dave, praised be high Heaven!" and Chispa Charley cast a reverent glance upward.

And it was true! The innocent were set free, the guilty punished. And the Rocky Mountain Menagerie was a thing of the past.

CHAPTER XX.

GIVEN MORE THAN LIFE.

LOUD and prolonged were the yells that went up from the lungs of the men of Canaan when they learned that the victory was complete, that the notorious Menagerie was truly a thing of the past, its members dead, dying or taken prisoners. And all the louder they cheered for the fact that this had been accomplished without the loss of a single life on their side, and only one or two insignificant flesh wounds to show that King Grizzly's pets had ever worn teeth.

There was only one source of regret. The fight was over before one-fourth of the band could scale the cliff to take a hand in. What Chispa Charley began, Dave Long and three or four others had completed. It was hardly fair; no man had a legal right to make a hog of himself!

Leaving his *posse* to disarm and bind the prisoners, Dave Long followed the hasty steps of Chispa Charley back to the little stone cell where King Grizzly had met with the worst surprise of his life.

They found Fremont Metcalf keeping guard over the painfully groaning wretch. Walter Teemer lay on his back. One arm was doubled beneath him. Fremont stood on the other, his back supported against the wall, his other foot raised and ready to fall upon the face of his enemy in case of need. That it had fallen at least once, was plain from the freshly bruised face.

Who could blame the young mine-owner? Certainly neither Chispa nor Dave, though the official instinct of the latter led him to rescue the outlaw chief as speedily as possible, while the King of Sports had eyes and arms only for Dinorah.

They had suffered much during those comparatively few hours, but it seemed as though all was richly paid for in that ardent embrace,

in those passionate kisses. And though Dinorah shed many tears, they were of joy too great for words to utter.

Dave Long first securely pinioned Walter Teemer, then he set about removing the handcuffs which still adorned the wrists of the young mine-owner. And by the time this was accomplished, Chispa and Dinorah had gotten over the wildest of their transports, and the King of Sports was ready for further business.

Hastily explaining to Dinorah, he called a couple of men from Canaan in whose care he placed her, then set the rest to work clearing the passage of the dead outlaws, stowing them away in King Grizzly's chamber for the present.

More than one surprise awaited the men of Canaan when the masks were removed from dead and living. Chispa Charley gazed more intently at some than at others, and Dave Long knew that these were of the gang that had so mercilessly tortured the Gold Nugget Sport the night before.

Fremont and Chispa both were surprised when they recognized Dick Morley standing, with unbound arms, and fancying he had been overlooked in the confusion, Chispa bade those nearest him remedy the oversight. Only to have Dave Long countermand the order.

"Only for him, we wouldn't be like this, pard," he hastily explained, as both Chispa and Fremont stared at him in half-angry surprise. "It was him that let down the rope to bring us up. It was him that saved ye all, fer without wings we couldn't 'a' got here in time to do any good."

"I was working for them—working for my children," the haggard-faced man muttered huskily, shrinking a little as Fremont Metcalf strode forward and placed both hands on his shoulders, turning his face so that the full light of the candles fell upon it.

"You still tell that story?" he demanded, sharply.

Dick Morley straightened up, and his eyes grew steady as he replied in firm, manly tones:

"While I draw the breath of life—yes! I may never be able to convince you, but it is God's truth! I am Tucker Metcalf. I am your father—your father and hers! I swear it by all that men hold holy!"

They were standing near where several of the wounded outlaws lay, and as that solemn, impassioned declaration rung out clearly, a feeble voice uttered the words:

"There isn't much of heaven about me, but if it's the truth you—want, I can—give it to you straight as a string—for a consideration."

The words came in fitful gasps, separated by painful breaths, and as the men looked at the speaker, they could see that he was not long for this world. Indeed, it was little short of a miracle that Mountain Lion—for he the speaker was—had lived until now.

With a choking cry that was almost a sob, Dick Morley rushed forward and dropped by his side, huskily crying:

"If you can tell—if you can only prove my truth, I—"

"Not for your sake—for my own," interposed Mountain Lion, with a short, rattling laugh.

Chispa Charley glanced doubtfully at Fremont. The young mine-owner's face was ghastly pale, and his voice was barely articulate as he muttered:

"Do it—promise him. He's dying now, and a dying man surely will tell the truth."

Mountain Lion heard him, and laughed again, saying:

"I never lied to friend or foe when well. I won't now. All I ask is to die—by myself. No hanging. Say yes, and I—tell all I know."

Dave Long motioned three of his men to come forward. He took hold of one corner of the blanket on which the dying outlaw lay, and aided by the others, bore him carefully through the cavern to the cell where Dinorah had been left.

"You kin talk better here," he said, briefly. "Ef you want me fer anythin', jest whistle an' I'll come."

"You'll stay," amended Fremont, catching his arm as he turned to follow the retreating men. "You will be one of the witnesses. For old friend's sake, Dave."

It would consume too much time and space were we to follow the painfully-broken sentences which dropped from the death-paling lips of Mountain Lion.

He first repeated his desired reward: to be permitted to breathe out his feeble remnant of life in peace. That he might not be handed over to the men of Canaan, who were seriously talking "lynch-law" as the shortest method of putting the surviving members of the "Rocky Mountain Menagerie" beyond the power of doing further mischief.

He was promised all he asked; then, frequently stimulated with brandy, he told what he knew of the black past.

He declared that, to the best of his knowledge, the story which Colonel Darius Teemer put into the mouth of Dick Morley was true as far as it went. He believed that Dick Morley was the

man who lost the fortune in Denver, through being drugged and driven crazy. For he, Mountain Lion, was the faro-dealer who first robbed, then shot the poor devil!

It was long years before he learned that Tucker Metcalf recovered from those injuries, and when he met him next he was once more in possession of a fortune. But he seemed to have forgotten the past; he certainly did not recognize the ex-faro-dealer.

He was buying the mine called "Better Yet" of Colonel Darius Teemer, paying hard cash for it, when Mountain Lion came into the office and was asked to witness the transaction. He did so, and then the money was paid, the title deeds and the receipt given in exchange, and Tucker Metcalf left the office.

Even then Colonel Teemer was playing a double part. He was the real head of the road-agents who, disguised as animals, committed the numerous depredations which led to Chispa Charley being sent there to ferret out the criminals. Mountain Lion was one of his most trusted men, and no sooner had Tucker Metcalf left the office than Colonel Teemer bade him collect a few of the gang and follow the new owner of the Better Yet.

He obeyed. They overtook Tucker Metcalf before the sun set, and killed him—as they would have taken oath. They had barely time to strip him of his valuables, when they were surprised by a strong band of prospectors. They fled in hot haste, and that was the last they ever heard of the title deeds and other property taken from Tucker Metcalf. The real chief of the band had them all, and he was never seen again by any of his fellows.

It was now certain that he met his death in that deserted shaft; but how, none could say with certainty. By accident? If murdered, would those papers be left with him? Would not that valuable ring, at least, have been taken by the slayers?

Nor was anything further seen or heard of Tucker Metcalf for years. The prospectors scattered in pursuit of the robbers. They went back to the scene of the robbery, but the body was gone. No one ever knew where or how; not even Tucker Metcalf himself!

It was not until less than a year prior to the opening scene of this story, that Tucker Metcalf, as Dick Morley, made his reappearance at Canaan and Tinker's Dam. At first Colonel Teemer was sorely frightened, but that did not last long. Dick Morley was not—could not be—the man he was taken for at first glance. If he was Tucker Metcalf, would he not come with power to take his own? Would he meet his enemies with such dull indifference? It was a startling resemblance, but that was all. And even when he sought out Dick Morley to play the part of the long-missing miner, he had not the faintest suspicion of the truth.

It was a strange story, but still stranger events have been placed on record.

Of course Mountain Lion could not swear positively that the man then present was Tucker Metcalf, but he firmly believed that such was the case.

And so did his interested hearers, now. Fremont Metcalf no longer fought against the conviction that had entered his heart despite his mind at the very first. Dinorah had long since yielded, and through the greater portion of the labored story, she lay in the arms of—never more Dick Morley!

Mountain Lion—he never gave another name—had his wish, and died peacefully, without the aid of the lynchers' noose. Some of his mates were less fortunate, since surely such an end was preferable to hanging, even though the hand of a regularly-commissioned officer fits the noose!

The day had hardly dawned when Chispa Charley, Dinorah and Fremont, escorted by a small body of enthusiastic men of Canaan, left the Den of the Rocky Mountain Menagerie and rode happily away to Canaan. Not back to their mansion, where the wedding was to have taken place. They felt that Canaan, through her gallant citizens, had won the right to have those postponed vows spoken within her limits. And so they were. It was late in the afternoon when Canaan was reached, but Chispa Charley with mock earnestness, declared that he would run no further risks of another elopement, and Dinorah yielded!

If Canaan was drunk on the eve of the intended wedding, she was gloriously drunk on the night of the actual wedding!

Gabriel Sexton kept "open house," and for the second time since his coming to Canaan, he went to bed—in one corner of The Grave—with his clothes on!

There was one event of that night that both Chispa and Fremont kept from the knowledge of Dinorah Hampton.

Walter Teemer was taken from the jail and hung by a mob from the top of the very tree to which he bound Chispa Charley two nights before.

There was no resistance made, for Dave Long was—whisper it gently, oh, reader!—drunk with toasting the bride and bridegroom and all of their relations, friends, acquaintances, past,

present, and to come! And there was not another soul in all Canaan—Chispa and his bride excepted—who would have raised voice or hand in defense of the wretch.

Those of the Menagerie who were able to travel, were taken and delivered up to the proper authorities. To dispose of them once for all, it may be stated here that they were tried in due time, found guilty of many crimes, and sentenced—some to death, others to imprisonment for such time as the various ill-deeds proven against them seemed to merit.

This done, Dave Long decided to retire from public life and go back to his relations in the far East. This he did, but not empty-handed, nor alone. For the agents of the company to which Chispa had telegraphed, came on in hot haste to close the bargain, shrewdly suspecting that he had struck some new and richer vein, and was seeking to slip out of their hands.

The money was paid, the property duly transferred, and rich for life, father, brother, sister, husband, bade adieu to Canaan and Tinker's Dam forever!

And as the time passed on, the memory of the long lost miner grew clearer and more perfect, though he could never fully explain how he won his second fortune, or how he had escaped death on that black day.

As for Charles Hampton—no longer Chispa Charley, the King of the Sports—no longer the Gold Nugget Sport—never more to be called Old Forked-Lightning—he resigned finally his commission as detective. One of his reasons—which he did not give his employers, however—was that Dinorah declared that if he refused, she would elope with the very first grizzly bear that came along and asked her!

THE END.

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